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"Pretty Women":
Urban Crisis and Female Objectification in Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*

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"Pretty Women":
Urban Crisis and Female Objectification in Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*

by

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Dedication

To my parents, for all of their support, and in loving memory of my grandmothers, Peggy Fritz and Marian Pribyl, whose stories of strength continue to inspire me.

Abstract

"Pretty Women": Urban Crisis and Female Objectification in Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*

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Stephen Sondheim's 1979 award-winning musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* was produced during a time of great political and economic uncertainty in New York City. Although not overtly political, the themes of urban crisis and class inequality that birthed the original legend of Sweeney Todd in Industrial Revolution London continued to play a large role within the modern musical, reflecting leftist political concerns at large. The main political argument within the work is the critique of class hierarchies created by capitalism and how the upper classes abuse the lower classes, ie. how Judge Turpin uses his power to abuse Sweeney Todd and the grave consequences of such actions. Less obvious, however, are the importance of gender hierarchy and the objectification of women within this anti-capitalist critique. This paper focuses on the character of Johanna and the three songs sung about her by the three main male leads. These songs provide a case study of how gendered objectification and commodification

play a significant role in the overall Marxist critique intrinsic to the musical and the Sweeney Todd legend overall. The work's rootedness in the anti-capitalist critique of the New Left in the 1970s and the concurrent rise of Marxist and socialist feminism provide clues to understanding the context and meaning behind the violent treatment of women within the musical as an extension of the anti-capitalist critique that is fundamental to the work.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"What more can man require than love, sir?"
"More than love, sir."
"What, sir?"
"Women."
"Ah, yes, women."
"Pretty women."[1]

Stephen Sondheim's Tony-award winning musical thriller *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* first drew my attention when I noticed that it had three songs about Johanna, yet she is a character who barely appears in the play, especially when compared to the other female lead, Mrs. Lovett. The questions I wanted to answer were: who is Johanna? Why are so many men singing about her, and why is she allotted so little time to speak for herself? Understanding the role of Johanna and the other women in *Sweeney Todd* became even more important for me after viewing the play and seeing and hearing the female characters become victims of rape, incest, and murder, all as Sweeney Todd and Judge Turpin, two of the male leads, sing about "Pretty Women." The song, which focuses on how men love to look at women, is almost a love duet between the Judge and Todd and is a clear illustration of how the objectification of women acts to support men's homosocial relationships. The main political argument within the work, however, is the critique of class hierarchies created by capitalism and how the upper classes abuse the lower classes. The Marxist, anti-capitalist elements within the musical situate it within the dying economy of New York City during 1979, the year of the show's opening run. The work's rootedness in the anti-capitalist critique of the New Left in the 1970s and the concurrent rise of Marxist and socialist feminism

[1] Stephen Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (n.p.: Rilting Music, Inc., 1999), 161.

provide clues to understanding the context and meanings behind the violent treatment of women as an extension of the anti-capitalist critique that was fundamental to Sondheim and producer/director Harold Prince.

It is important to understand the violence against women in Sondheim's 1979 musical *Sweeney Todd* because of the legend's lasting popularity and how the musical has become intricately intertwined with current culture. The story began as an English urban legend and was first published in a penny dreadful serial entitled *The String of Pearls* in 1846. Sondheim's inspiration came from Christopher Bond's theatrical adaptation of the story, whose play Sondheim and book writer Hugh Wheeler followed very closely.[2] The musical won eight Tony awards, including Best Musical, and has since been revived numerous times in the United States and abroad. Most recently, it was the subject of a major motion picture directed by Tim Burton, starring such famous actors as Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, and Alan Rickman.[3]

The musical includes a typical love story between the ingénue, Johanna and the hero, Antony, yet Todd's wife's rape is the only blatantly mentioned example of sexual relations within the musical, and the treatment of women by most of the men is quite dismal. The Judge, who is the villain, treats women particularly badly, raping Lucy, Todd's wife, and then trying to force relations on his adopted daughter, Johanna. However, Sweeney also treats women poorly. He leads Mrs. Lovett on, while focusing solely on getting his daughter back. However, it becomes clear as the story progresses that his view of Johanna is actually an idolization of her and an equation of Johanna with Lucy and his lost life. It seems that the sailor, Antony, is in fact the only man in the story

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[2] Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 282.

[3] For more about the plot of the story and the plot of the original legend, see Appendix.

who treats women well, yet even he objectifies Johanna. For example, objectification occurs in a duet between Todd and Turpin entitled "Pretty Women," wherein the two men sing about how much they enjoy looking at women. Paul Puccio and Scott Stoddart, in their article about duets in the works of Sondheim state, "Woman here [during *Pretty Women*] is nothing more than the object of the male gaze."[4] In fact, throughout the play, it seems that women are nothing but the object of the male gaze.

The first chapter of this paper does exactly what Sondheim asks the audience to do in the opening line of the musical, "Attend the tale." By analyzing the origins of the Sweeney Todd story, the legend's time and place, London during the Industrial Revolution, becomes an obvious mainstay for the legend's popularity. Many Londoners today continue to believe that the legend is based in truth. The setting of the legend also continues to inspire artists during times of urban threat in other times and places. Chapter two looks at the similarities between urban crisis in nineteenth-century London, when the legend first appeared, and 1970s New York City, when the musical was composed and produced. This chapter supports the notion that horror reinforces, in Robert Walser's words, "the sense of security undermined by the dysfunctions of capitalism…It is less an irrational phenomenon than a way of dealing with the irrationality of the American Social system."[5] The legend of Sweeney Todd is attached to the urban realm and to economic exploitation, and its relevance continues in modern capitalist societies. Chapter three explores the permeation of anti-capitalist critique in all aspects of the 1979 original Broadway production, including the music, set, and staging. Todd's role as a victim of circumstance and capitalist exploitation rather than just a villain was crucial for Harold

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[4] Paul M. Puccio and Scott F. Stoddart, "It takes Two: A Duet on Duets in *Follies* and *Sweeney Todd*," in *Reading Stephen Sondheim,* ed. Sandor Goodhart (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 124.

[5] Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 161.

Prince's decision to produce and direct the work, even though he had already worked on a number of projects with Sondheim. Chapter four finally attempts to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this introduction, using the rise of Marxist, socialist, and radical feminisms during the 1970s as a lens through which the three songs entitled "Johanna," sung each by Antony, Turpin, and Todd, can be interpreted and understood as belonging to a gendered critique of capitalism.

I hope that through this paper, I will be able to reintroduce the female perspective into this work, which has been in many ways silenced or made invisible by the rules of capitalism and bourgeois society. The guidelines for proper behavior make it impossible for women to have agency and not become a villain or a victim. By using Johanna as one of the many examples of how women are abused and oppressed by specific sex/gender expectations within capitalism, this paper attempts to open the eyes of audiences about the importance of who is allowed to speak and who is not, about what are the allowed to speak, and why all of this might have mattered and been much more obvious to audiences of the original 1979 Broadway production.

Chapter 1

Attend the Tale: The Beginning of a Legend

"Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd!"[6]

"Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd!" the opening line from Stephen Sondheim's 1979 musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* tells the audience. The legend of Sweeney Todd has been a constant in English society since the first appearance of the Demon Barber in the middle of the nineteenth century, including publications, theatrical adaptations, and films. The stories of urban criminals from this period, such as the fictional Deadwood Dick and Sexton Blake or the all-too-real Jack the Ripper, have begun to constitute a "new mythology."[7] Myths that persist throughout time and through different cultures can give insight into what parts of the story speak to humans more universally and which are uniquely necessary for the specific place. Northrop Frye has noted, "Myth is a special type of story, seldom located in history, but rather above ordinary time."[8] However, one of the most compelling elements of the Sweeney Todd story is its firmly established setting, both in place and time, London during the Industrial Revolution.[9] Although the story is firmly situated in a moment, Robert Mack in his book *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd* observes that,

> The persistent reiteration of Todd's narrative throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrates its deeper symbolic importance as a tangible representation of an ongoing struggle that exists deep within the heart of modern

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[6] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 4.
[7] E. S. Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys: The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton, et. al* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd. 1948), 13.
[8] Robert L. Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd: The Life and Times of an Urban Legend* (London: Continuum, 2007), 52.
[9] Ibid., 83.

> urban civilization – a struggle that pits…rich against poor…and greed and avarice against the imperatives of simple human charity.[10]

Both the timeless and time specific elements made the Todd story compelling to its original audience and enable the story to continue to be popular a century and a half later.

One of the reasons that many people have held onto the Todd legend is the enormous amount of detail that accompanies the story and makes it appear plausible. Dick Collins calls the story "utterly believable" because of the gruesomeness of Todd's character and the strong sense of place within which the story occurs.[11] The retellings of the story are often accompanied by "facts," such as that Sweeney Todd was born on October 26, 1756, in Steepeny, or that his residence was on Fleet Street, although multiple addresses, including 69, 153, 154, 184, 186, and 187, have been suggested through the many reiterations of the tale.[12] The legitimacy of the story was helped by the discovery of unexplainable human remains under St. Dunstable's church on Fleet Street, the location where Todd and Lovett buried the bones of their victims in the original story.[13] Fleet Street itself had a somewhat gruesome history around the supposed life of Sweeney Todd, including its association with the Red Barn Murderer William Corder in 1827 and the infamous Elizabeth Browning, who in 1767 was hung for brutally killing her apprentice, Mary Clifford. The strong associations of the story with Fleet Street and St. Dunstable's give the legend a whiff of reality. Most of all, the story was written during a time of great change in London and the conditions of urbanity. The strong associations with a changing London and the fear these changes brought about rooted the story firmly in the collective imagination of Londoners.

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[10] Ibid., 93.
[11] Dick Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls: The Original Tale of Sweeney Todd,* by Anonymous (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2005), xi.
[12] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 78-79.
[13] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 78.

The character of the Demon Barber has overshadowed the original, humble origins of the legend. The character of Sweeney Todd first appeared in a penny dreadful serial, weekly publications sold for a penny aimed primarily at working class boys; however, ads in the magazines for services such as hair-loss cures, hint at a broader audience.[1415] Penny dreadfuls were known for their high-levels of blood, horror, and gore, and for more sensationalism than plot cohesiveness. The serial in which Todd first appeared was entitled *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, begun in the winter of 1846, in *The People's Periodical and Family Library*, published by Edward Lloyd.[16] The story was very appropriate for the time. Mack claims that the legend of Sweeney Todd "is a story that makes use of some of the darkest myths of human culture to comment on everything from the exploitative nature of capitalist enterprises, to the arguably more essential and seductive powers and appetites of love, sex and desire."[17] As I will show here, the roles played by women in society and intense concerns about sexual politics, as well as the issue of capitalist oppression, were on the minds of many nineteenth-century Londoners during this period.[18]

The author of *The String of Pearls* is highly contested. The publisher, Edward Lloyd, was himself a somewhat shady character, who originally gained his wealth with

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[14] The term penny dreadful is somewhat contested. As Robert Mack notes, it was not used until the second half of the nineteenth century by "reformed" publishers, such as Charles Fox, who published the second, longer version of Sweeney Todd. Penny blood was the term used earlier; however, both terms were used interchangeably for the latter half of the nineteenth century (Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 139).

[15] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls: The Original Tale of Sweeney Todd,* vi. Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys,* 16.

[16] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* v-vi.

[17] Mack , *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 53.

[18] The story only somewhat resembles Christopher Bond's later reimagining on which Sondheim based his musical. In *The String of Pearls*, Sweeney Todd is a villain barber, motivated by greed, who kills his victims, mostly sailors and rural country folk, for their money and belongings. Although there are similarities in plot to Bond's version, the original tale casts Todd as pure villain and allots for no sympathy from the reader for his grisly end, as he has no tragic backstory. For a more detailed plot summary, see Appendix.

writer Thomas Peckett Prest, by pirating and re-writing already popular, published stories. It was not until the Copyright Act of 1842 that Lloyd and Prest were forced to find new material to publish.[19] Mack surmises that Prest or James Malcolm Rymer, another of Lloyd's writers, are the most likely authorial candidates.[20] Dick Collins, in his preface to the newly published version of *The String of Pearls*, also points to Prest and Rymer, but also to E. P. Hingston or A. R. Smith and notices that the story most likely had at least two, if not three or more, authors, a common trait of penny dreadfuls.[21] The question of authorship is further complicated by the fact that Charles Fox, seeking to capitalize on the immense popularity of the story, published an immensely expanded (and many believe, inferior) version of the story in 1850, retitled *The String of Pearls or a Sailor's Gift.*[22] Regardless of author, the story resonated with the public and became enormously popular, even legendary, as many Londoners began to believe the story was based in truth.[23]

One of the most striking elements of the narrative is that Sweeney Todd was clearly not intended to be the main character of *The String of Pearls*, but as Mack suggests, "he is a character who takes over and devours what was intended originally to have been the stories and narratives of others."[24] Todd has reached the status of legend, eclipsing his original fictional status. Today, Sweeney Todd is one of the many legends that most Londoners would struggle to name its origins.[25] Mack asserts that at the time of the publication of *The String of Pearls*, "Todd was a figure who the majority of

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[19] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* vi.
[20] Mack , *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,*145.
[21] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* vii.
[22] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls*, viii.
[23] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, 76.
[24] Ibid., 103.
[25] Ibid., 72.

citizens (then as now) simply assumed *must* have been a genuine historical figure."[26] As one can only prove that someone did exist, not that she or he never existed, it would be difficult for most historians to persuade the residents of London of Todd's fictional origins.

Although there is no proof that a murderous barber and opportunistic baker took up residence on Fleet Street, there are numerous other non-fiction possibilities on which this story might have been based. Scholars and fans have continually searched for a real-life source for the Sweeney Todd myth because, as Mack points out, "part of our collective psyche actually *wants* or even *needs* his story to be true."[27] There have been many attempts to discover a kernel of truth within the Sweeney Todd story. Tod Slaughter, who played Sweeney Todd on the stage for British troops in Germany in 1947, claimed that the origin of the story was German myth. Others have claimed the source was thirteenth-century serial murderer Sawney Bean. This theory holds some water, as Thomas Peckett Prest is also the probable author of another penny dreadful based on this real-life Scot entitled *Sawney Bean, The Man-Eater of Midlothian.*[28] Most likely, however, if there was a non-fictional source, it came from across the English Channel, a story from seventeenth-century France by Jacques de Breuil in the book *Le Théâtre des Antiquités de Paris*, wherein two brothers, a barber and a pie-maker, join together in a nefarious plot similar to that of Todd and Lovett.[29] There is no definitive proof that any of these were the source, especially as stories of murder and cannibalism were common during Industrial Revolution London.

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[26] Ibid., 76.
[27] Ibid., 172.
[28] Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys,* 39.
[29] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 163.

The anonymous author of *The String of Pearls* was not the only Londoner imagining grisly murderers and questionable meat products in nineteenth-century London. Urban legends involving killer barbers and meat made of human remains were both common in London during the Industrial Revolution, a reflection of the commodification and consumerism of humans inherent in the capitalist system. The rise of a changing urban landscape removed consumers from the production process, inspiring grisly tales of unethical and immoral practices. In June of 1818, a gossip broadsheet published by James Catnach caused a riot by printing (falsely, of course) that a butcher in Clare Market, London, named Thomaz Pizzey was putting human meat in his pork sausages.[30] An 1825 scandal sheet called *A Tell-Tale* referenced a murderous barber in Paris.[31] Charles Dickens actually referenced a myth of urban cannibalism and meat pies in his 1843 serial *Martin Chuzzlewit*, showing that these sorts of myths were already circulating around England at the time of Todd's inception.[32] Violence had become more common in London's popular culture as a manifestation of the changing urban landscape.[33]

The story has morphed and changed throughout the years, but the fundamental elements have stayed the same. After the publication of *The String of Pearls*, Sweeney Todd began to take over the imaginations of Englishmen and Americans alike, and he has continued to do so over the past century and a half.[34] There is always Sweeney Todd, of

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[30] Ibid., 173.
[31] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* ix.
[32] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 150.
[33] Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in nineteenth-century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 9.
[34] "[The story of Sweeney Todd] has demonstrated itself to be peculiarly resonant; each successive generation has been compelled to use the mythic and metaphorical elements inherent in the tale of Sweeney Todd…effectively to mirror its own concerns, both as individuals and as members of society at large." Mack , *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* xvii.

course, Mrs. Lovett as the cannibal baker, and usually a judge; Fleet Street and St. Dunstable's also play a prominent role, but beyond this handful of constants, the rest of the story varies wildly.[35] Literature continues to draw on the story, with Sweeney playing both small and prominent roles. In 1876, a Dickens periodical called *All the Year Round* featured a side paragraph about the demon barber, and in 1883, the story of "The Link Boy of Old London" in Fox's *Boy's Standard* featured Sweeney Todd, who fell in love with one of his victim's wives, and was forced to prove her husband's death so he could marry her.[36] The story continually changes to reflect the times. In the more conservative 1930s, Mollifont Press featured a story of Sweeney Todd that only hinted at the possibility of cannibalism because "such a thing is too terrible to contemplate."[37] The story of Sweeney Todd importantly also influenced later horror authors, especially Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson.[38]

Todd influenced literature, but the story had a much larger impact on the theatre. The story of Sweeney Todd "was readily adapted to the theatre, and stage carpenters were to be busy for the next hundred years constructing disappearing chairs."[39] The first Sweeney Todd play actually opened before the serial was completed. George Dibdin Pitt took it upon himself, on March 20, 1847, to write his own ending to *The String of Pearls* and stage it in London.[40] The conclusion of *The String of Pearls*, although drastically different from Pitt's play, seems to have been somewhat influenced by the stage production. There is evidence that the two worked together to form parallel, yet differing canonical texts, further obscuring authorship and giving the story the feeling of an orally

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[35] Ibid., 83.
[36] Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys,* 46.
[37] Ibid., 47.
[38] Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* v.
[39] Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys,* 39.
[40] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 106.

transmitted urban legend rather than a printed, fictional story.[41] Sweeney Todd was so popular on the stage that between 1840 and the late 1850s there were at least nine pirated versions of the story being staged in London.[42] New York City had its first experience with the Demon Barber long before Sondheim's musical, when in 1850, Henry Hazel brought his stage version to America entitled *Sweeney Todd or the Ruffian Barber: A Tale of the Terrors of the Seas and the Mysteries of the City.*[43]

The story of Sweeney Todd also had numerous, unfortunate real-life consequences. The name of Sweeney Todd has since become synonymous with the occupation of barber.[44] The strong popularity of the story has been linked to the disuse of the word barber during the Victorian era and a rising use of the term "hairdresser."[45] Besides having a deleterious effect on the barber trade, fictional crime stories such as the story of Sweeney Todd might have inspired the most notorious real-life killer of London, Jack the Ripper. Collins states, "The Ripper became the archetype of the night-stalking serial killer, but he took it all from Sweeney Todd."[46] Jack the Ripper even participated in alleged cannibalism, mailing part of the kidney of one of his victims to the head of the Scotland Yard, George Lusk, with a letter saying that he enjoyed eating the rest.[47] The story of Sweeney Todd is intricately entwined with the history of London, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction, especially when fiction perhaps influenced real life.

One of the most important elements of the legend of Sweeney Todd is its clear sense of place and attachment to Industrial Revolution London. The "urban" part of

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41 Ibid., 107.
42 Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* x.
43 Ibid.
44 Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys,* 37.
45 Ibid.
46 Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls,* xi.
47 Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 44.

Todd's urban legend is an essential component to what makes the story continually popular, and what made it relevant to both Londoners in the 1840s and New Yorkers in the 1970s. The story has continued to be relevant to modern audiences, including audiences outside of London. Mack explains,

> A closer examination of the various manifestations of the many 'lives' of Sweeney Todd yields considerable insight into some of the most compelling mythical and metaphorical elements inherent in modern city life, and in the experience of human 'civilization' and the civilizing process, generally.[48]

The chaos and change of urban life, especially the exploitation of the lower classes, created an atmosphere in which the story of a Demon Barber and the possibility of cannibalizing one's fellow man become possible and terrifying. After discussing London in the 19th century, I will move to the time and place of Sweeney Todd's most successful career, Broadway in 1979.

[48] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* xvii.

Chapter 2

A Great Black Pit: The Horror of Urban Crisis

"There's a whole in the world like a great black pit,
and it's filled with people who are filled with shit,
and the vermin of the world in habit it,
and it goes by the name of London." [49]

The setting of London during the Industrial Revolution and its poor living conditions are key to understanding the importance of class and economic inequality within the musical and are a fundamental part of the original Sweeney Todd legend. The surge of violent crime literature in nineteenth-century London is arguably related to the social upheaval and poor living conditions created by urbanization and the industrial revolution. Mack claims, "Sweeney Todd is the perfect epitome of the thrusting individualism and the aggressive self-determination of the new capitalism."[50] Economic and social crisis were also present in New York City during the composition and premiere of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in the 1970s. Roger Alcaly and David Mermelstein, in their 1977 collection of essays entitled *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities*, claim, "Ultimately, the origins of urban fiscal crisis lie in the process of capitalist accumulation, in a system of economic growth dictated by capital's needs to seek ever greater profits."[51] To many liberal critics, capitalism and deregulation were to blame for the bleak state of New York City in the 1970s. The Sweeney Todd legend, based in the

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[49] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 25.
[50] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 194.
[51] Roger F. Alcaly and David Mermelstein., preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), ix.

immorality of laissez-faire capitalism and social unrest of the industrial revolution, was significant for the extreme economic crisis in New York City a century later.

Scholars have long argued that there is a connection between the violent penny dreadfuls and theatre of 19th-century London and the rise of industrialized capitalism and economic crisis. Karl Marx even argued that gothic stories both illustrated and distracted from the horrors of the everyday capitalist system.[52] The increasing centralization of the urban structure also provided an excellent back drop for most of these horror stories to take place. For Londoners, the twists and turns of the city streets began to replace the woods and forests of more traditional fairytales.[53] As the city began to take precedent in English culture over rural life, the new environment spurred new fears and anxieties, and along with those, new myths. Understanding these myths requires an understanding of the trauma and horror of the urban situation in nineteenth-century London.[54] The awful working conditions of London during the rise of Sweeney Todd were an essential component to its popularity and cultural currency.

London during the Industrial Revolution was facing an economic upheaval, wherein production was shifting from the individual artisan to unskilled labor that was quick, efficient, and cheap. This shift was paralleled in the horror of the Sweeney Todd legend. As Gregory Dart observed in his notes for a 1979 London Production of *Sweeney Todd*,

> [Sweeney Todd] also tap[s] into a network of more historically specific anxieties, which have to do with labor, commodity, and the industrial revolution. One of the scariest things about Sweeney…is his efficiency: the fact that he manages to

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[52] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 67.
[53] Ibid., 76.
[54] Ibid., xviii.

> turn murder and the recycling of human flesh into a highly efficient cottage industry.[55]

The specificity of the setting of this work is underlined by the fact that, as French sociologist Veronique Campon-Vincent has noted, there is a history between urban myths that involve involuntary cannibalism and times of industrial expansion.[56] Economic change and economic crisis tend to breed horror and violent entertainment as a reflection of uncertain times.

During the Industrial Revolution, London went through a social, geographic, and economic expansion in which hierarchies and power structures shifted and institutions were created and destroyed; all of this instability had a profound effect on popular culture.[57] Most historians date London's industrial revolution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[5859] During this period, London's population was expanding rapidly. In 1550, London was not even in the top ten most populous cities in Europe, yet by the end of the seventeenth century, it was Europe's largest city.[60] From 1801 to 1841, London's population doubled from one million people to two million people, and by 1901, the city contained over six million people.[61] London's population had increased greatly in size, but had also shifted dramatically in demographics and the availability of an unskilled labor force.[62] However, the growth of wealth caused by the

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[55] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 88. This parallels the disregard for regulation and labor laws supported by neoliberalism in both England and the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s.
[56] Ibid., 94.
[57] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 8.
[58] The exact dates of the industrial revolution in London are somewhat disputable. The generally accepted date range is from 1780 to 1830, although many historians argue that it extended long into the nineteenth century.
[59] E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9.
[60] Ibid., 13.
[61] L.C.B. Seaman, *Life in Victorian London* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1973), 9-10.
[62] Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change,* 14.

industrial revolution was not equally distributed throughout the new population, creating social unrest.[63]

"Urban regeneration," similar to what today would be referred to as urban gentrification, became an important project for Londoners due to the large expansion in population, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century.[64] Although somewhat successful by the middle of the century, the improvements made in the upper and middle class parts of the city led to a growth of slums and urban decay in other sections of London.[65] Urban regeneration only benefited a few, and by the 1840s, the working class was left with low wages, overcrowding, poor living conditions, and high levels of unemployment.[6667] Such poor living conditions for the working class only added to the social instability and unease created by the overhaul of social and economic structures brought on by the industrial revolution.

With overcrowding, poor living conditions, and social instability, political unrest became a constant concern for the London government, especially from the 1820s until the 1850s. The industrial revolution, in many ways, should have been a time for prosperity for all members of society. As Marx recognized, with industrialization "poverty became in a sense a matter of choice. The capacity to alleviate it now existed."[68] However, because of proto-industrialization, a term referring to the removal of the producer from direct access to the market and the introduction of the middle man, who often owns both the material and the machinery on which the producer works, the

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[63] Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change,* 68.
[64] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 16.
[65] Ibid., 17.
[66] Seaman, *Life in Victorian London,* 11.
[67] Over-competition from the suburbs and the large city population made it difficult to regulate the meat and butcher industries, so fears of contamination and poor meat quality were justified, giving credence and weight to the Sweeney Todd legend (Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 12).
[68] Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change,* 97.

prosperity of the industrial revolution was reserved for those who already had capital with which to invest.[69] The unequal distribution of wealth, along with an overcrowding of cheap, unskilled laborers, led very quickly to civil unrest and the need for violent, gothic entertainments, such as the many theatrical productions of *Sweeney Todd* that swept London.

Economic and industrial upheaval introduced a new social structure to the inhabitants of London. This structure was rooted firmly in class-consciousness.[70] Those of the lower-middle class were desperately trying to delineate themselves from the working class, as the amount of income between the two was often negligible; therefore, what has now been dubbed the "Cult of Respectability" came into being.[71] This cult of respectability emphasized genteelness and manners, eschewing violent outbursts and brawls. Although violence declined between men during this period, levels of domestic violence between husbands and wives increased.[72] As the role of women changed and society became ensconced in the separation of the spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood, men took their insecurities home with them. Violence also began to appear in the form of violent entertainment, such as penny dreadfuls and horror plays.

It has been documented that throughout Western history, horror reemerges in popularity during times of great social stress. The 1970s in the United States was also a time of extreme economic and social turmoil. As Robert Walser notes in his book *Running with the Devil,* during this period, horror movies achieved "their greatest popularity ever…[during a] time of crisis of legitimacy for dominant institutions and the

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[69] Ibid., 92.
[70] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 29.
[71] Seaman, *Life in Victorian London,* 15-16.
[72] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 5.

economy."[73] Horror movies and musicals became a way for America to deal with great economic insecurity.[74] Capitalism proved itself as an unstable entity in both nineteenth-century London and 1970s New York City, so the legend of Sweeney Todd provided both an outlet for such insecurity and unease as well as a way to critique the unfair capitalist structure.

The 1970s was a time of economic turmoil specifically in New York City. In their introduction to *The End of Prosperity: The American Economy in the 1970s,* Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy declare, "By 'the end of prosperity' we mean the end of the long period from the 1940s to the early 1970s…we are now several years into a new period of sluggish capital accumulation [and] unemployment in the advanced capitalist countries."[75] Rising economic turmoil and inflation were caused from the expense of the Vietnam War combined with competition from overseas companies, specifically from Japan.[76] Other causes of inflation were the more general "new imperialism" of the United States, wage concessions required to gain support for unpopular wars, trade barriers, specifically protective tariffs, increasing globalization, the growth of credit and large-scale banking, and monopoly capitalism caused by the frequent conglomeration of large corporations.[77]

New York City was particularly hard hit during this crisis. The recession that struck the United States from 1969 to 1970 never seemed to actually end in New York City, and eventually hit its nadir during the fall of 1974.[78] Between 1969 and 1976, the

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[73] Walser, *Running with the Devil,* 161.
[74] During the current economic crisis, horror movies have made a comeback, including the *Saw* franchise and remakes of many 1980s horror films, including *Halloween* and *The Nightmare on Elm Street*.
[75] Harry Magdoff and Paul M. Sweezy, *The End of Prosperity: The American Economy in the 1970s* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), vii.
[76] Ibid., 3-4.
[77] Ibid., 19.
[78] Alcaly and Mermelstein, preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities*, xi-xii.

city lost 500,000 jobs, whereas in other cities throughout the United States, unemployment was dropping.[79] Urban ghettos formed from large numbers of industrial jobs disappearing in the city center, leaving many people unemployed.[80] As conditions in inner-city New York became worse for the urban poor, other areas of the city began to experience urban gentrification. Much like the result of urban renewal in nineteenth-century London, urban gentrification led to prosperity for those already wealthy, but actually hurt the overall economic vitality of the city.[81] Fiscal and economic policies that attempted to revive the ailing city and help it out of its recession protected large businesses at the expense of labor and poor individuals.[82] New York City was a place of economic uncertainty and social instability.

The government, however, had little sympathy for the plight of workers during this period. Economic policies instituted in the 1970s did little to help individual workers and more to help large corporations. William Tabb, in his book *The Long Default,* published in 1982, argues that policies favoring corporations over individuals caused and perpetuated the fiscal crisis in New York City.[83] For example, the Ford administration's plan to cut wages for the average worker improved the bottom line of big business.[84] Mermelstein explains sarcastically, "In short, in the peculiar world of capitalism, bad news is good news: cutbacks are necessary for recovery, while a slow-paced upturn is welcomed as a brake on inflation and indicator of prolonged expansion."[85] The centrality

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[79] Roger F. Alcaly and David Mermelstein., "Part I: Overviews," in *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 4.
[80] Alcaly and Mermelstein, preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities,* x.
[81] Alcaly and Mermelstein, "Part I: Overviews,"4.
[82] Ibid., 3.
[83] William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 3-4.
[84] Alcaly and Mermelstein, preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities*, xii.
[85] Mermelstein, "Austerity, Planning and the Socialist Alternative," 353.

of anti-capitalist critique in *Sweeney Todd* easily found fertile ground in the intellectual left and the unfortunate situation of New York City during the 1970s.

Even though mainstream political thought was moving towards the conservative economic policies of neoliberalism promoted by President Ronald Reagan, the intellectual Left, of whom Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince would have identified along with other members of New York's art scene, began to explore the failures of capitalism. Because of the connection between poor living conditions, economic crisis, and corporate capitalism, a large number of intellectuals began to believe that the solution to the crisis had to be found outside the capitalist framework, in socialism.[86] David Epstein, in his article "The Last Days of New York" concluded that "New York's decline is probably inseparable from a general crisis in capitalism."[87] The connection between social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the need for a new economic system became more apparent. Mermelstein argues that socialism goes beyond economics, and the eradication of all types of privilege is necessary for its success.[88] As will be explored later, capitalism perpetuates not only class privilege, but other types of privilege as well, including gender privilege. The risk of breaking out of capitalism is a high one for many workers, however, as they depend on their low-paying jobs to make it through their daily lives.[89] Workers relied on the capitalist system for even the meager wages that they were

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[86] A great example of this is David Mermelstein's 1977 article "Austerity, Planning, and the Socialist Alternative, " in *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities,* ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein.

[87] David Epstein, "The Last Days of New York," in *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 63.

[88]David Mermelstein, "Austerity, Planning, and the Socialist Altnerative," in *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 358

[89] Ibid., 353

afforded during the 1970s, and breaking out of such a system held no guarantee for a better life.

The solution of socialism determined by the intellectual left never came to fruition, however. Policies implemented in the 1980s by the Reagan administration moved towards more deregulation and a cutting of social programs as documented in David Harvey's book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* Harvey does note, though,

> The crisis of capital accumulation in the 1970s affected everyone through the combination of rising unemployment and accelerating inflation. Discontent was widespread and the conjoining of labor and urban social movements throughout much of the advanced capitalist world appeared to point towards the emergence of a socialist alteration to the social compromise between capital and labor that had grounded capital accumulation so successfully in the post-war period. Communist and socialist parties were gaining ground.[90]

The 1960s saw "subjectivist neo-Marxism, gestating over fifty years, [begin] leaking into mainstream American culture."[91] Economic turmoil led to a new proliferation of theories surrounding socialism and Marxism, theories which appeared in art, music, and on stage, including Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*.

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[90] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14-15.
[91] Robert A. Gorman, *Yankee Red: Nonorthodox Marxism in Liberal America* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 48-49.

Chapter 3

Man Devouring Man: The Politics of the New Left in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*

"The all deserve to die!
Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett, tell you why:
Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett,
There are two kinds of men, and only two.
There's the one staying put in his proper place
And the one with his foot in the other one's face."[92]

The explorations into capitalism and its possible negative consequences were already written into Christopher Bond's 1972 play *Sweeney Todd,* on which Sondheim and Wheeler based the musical. Although the original serial previously contained sociopolitical commentary surrounding the pitfalls of bourgeois greed, Bond fleshes out the characters, adds backstories, and creates a much more nuanced storyline. Class critique continues to be an important part of the plot, as the accruement of material wealth is the main motivator for Mrs. Lovett in her cannibalistic scheme to use Todd's victims as meat for her pies, and revenge against the wealthy Judge Turpin continues to be Todd's sole motivation. Bond's adaption of the original story aims at maintaining the sociopolitical commentary already present in the original legend, yet expands its theatricality and makes the commentary more relevant to the present day.[93] As Joanne Gordon suggests, "[Bond's] work is an implicit critique of Victorian England's class structure and frequent perversions of justice. The rampant materialism of the industrial

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[92] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 173.
[93] Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim.* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 208.

revolution and its demeaning impact on human dignity is also suggested."[94] Gordon alludes here to the connection between the capitalist system and the awful situation within which the characters find themselves. Bond draws on the themes of *The String of Pearls*, yet adds more moral complexity that emphasizes the role of class structure in the demise of Todd, rather than attributing his demise solely to individual greed.

Sondheim's adaption of Bond's play for a musical stayed quite loyal to the original text. For Sondheim, the most difficult part was fleshing out Sweeney's justification for his serial murders, which in Bond's play, appeared somewhat unrelated to his need for revenge.[95] Sondheim added Todd's justification to the Bond play through the use of anti-capitalist critique. Todd sings, "They all deserve to die!/Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett, tell you why:/ Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett,/ There are two kinds of men, and only two./ There's the one staying put in his proper place/And the one with his foot in the other one's face…the lives of the wicked should be made brief/For the rest of us, death will be a relief!" which suggests that his actions are based on revenge for all of those victimized by the abuse of the upper classes.[96] When Harold Prince was brought in to direct the show, Todd's obsession with revenge was one that Prince struggled to understand because he did not feel that he himself was a vengeful person; he was very hesitant to participate in the show, though he did eventually agree.[97] Sondheim observed,

> "What helped was [Prince's] decision to take his own approach to the subject matter. The main characters in the play were, after all, people who had been driven to acts of extreme desperation at a time when the Industrial Revolution was dehumanizing British society. Since Bond had drawn a distinction between his

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[94] Ibid., 209.
[95] Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 291.
[96] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,*173-175.
[97] Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim,* 296.

> upper-class characters, who spoke in blank verse, and the Proletariat, that led Prince to see the actors as personifying various stages of helplessness and impotence."[98]

Prince believed that by framing the show through a critique of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, the characters could be viewed as more sympathetic, and Todd's penchant for revenge could be seen as part of a larger social problem.

Prince's decision to focus on the larger societal structures at play within the work permeated all of the elements of *Sweeney Todd*, including the set, the music, and the text. The musical Sondheim worked on previously to *Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures,* was a clear critique of racism and American Imperialism in Southeast Asia. Indeed, Sondheim has a long history of incorporating his liberal politics into his works, although he usually does not like to admit it.[99] One of the main ways that Prince and Sondheim displayed their politics was through reappropriating Brechtian Epic Theatre techniques. Although according to Meryle Secrest, "Sondheim…disliked most of Brecht's work," he was not against using subtler versions of Brecht's techniques to keep the critique of capitalism central to the show.[100] Sondheim was willing to have his politics enter his musicals, but he wanted the emphasis to be on character development rather than political analysis. Sondheim stated, "One of my objections to Brecht is that it's always politics to the forefront and the characters to the rear."[101] By insinuating techniques such as gestus and framing, rather than embracing them full on, Sondheim and Prince were able to keep the story and the characters central, while using class criticism as glue between the different elements of the work. Sondheim explains,

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[98] Ibid., 296.
[99] Steve Swayne*, How Sondheim Found his Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 157.
[100] Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim,* 188.
[101] Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim,* 363-363.

> "I was most concerned that we not soap-box [in *Sweeney Todd*]. [Harold Prince] was too, because we both like didactive theatre, but don't like soap-boxes. I try to do it by just inserting here and there through the lyrics words like 'engine,' basic images, not just inserting the word but using them as little motivating forces to make a slightly wispy connection with the industrial revolution."[102]

Class abuse permeates the story, yet it is implicitly cited, something that allows the work to function as horror and melodrama, as well as social commentary.

One difference between the manifestation of greed in *The String of Pearls* and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* is the fact that in the penny dreadful, Todd and Mrs. Lovett are the villains because they are not of the bourgeoisie or upper-class. This contrasts with the heroes, such as Johanna and Mark Ingestrie, who are of the bourgeoisie. The penny dreadful presents Todd and Mrs. Lovett as villains because they want to partake in the finer things of life without actually being part of the upper class, which played into the fears of bourgeois Englishmen in the 19th century. However, in Sondheim's version, it is those of the upper class who commit the most villainous atrocities. Judge Turpin abuses his position in order to send Sweeney Todd away and rape Lucy, something framed as worse than Todd and Lovett's serial murder and unknowing cannibalism, which is framed as a desperate act by desperate humans. Sondheim presents the members of the upper class as the villains for using their money and power to abuse the proletariat, a distinct difference.

Good and evil are never straightforward in the works of Sondheim, however. Although Todd is presented as the victim of class abuse because of the Judge's horrible actions, this abuse is not adequate to justify his and Mrs. Lovett's later actions in the play, namely the killing, butchery, and cannibalism of innocent men. Sondheim gives Todd justification, although admittedly not much, for his actions, and Mrs. Lovett wishes to improve her social status and economic security and to be closer of Todd, whom she

[102] Swayne, *How Sondheim Found his Sound,* 157.

wishes to marry. The original penny dreadful presents a straightforward view of right and wrong, wherein greed is the motivator for villainy, yet Sondheim's adaptation complicates this view by highlighting the larger structures at work.

Class conflict and capitalist critique are critical parts of the story and libretto for *Sweeney Todd*, and both the music and the set and staging of the original Broadway production reinforce these themes. Using a variety of techniques, some derived from Brechtian Epic theatre, Sondheim and Prince created a play whose central morals and characteristics were based on critiquing the ails of capitalism, creating a unity between the disparate elements of the work. Sondheim's use of dance topics, framing, and diegetic sounds is combined with Prince's use of many of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* to help connect all of the elements of the work with issues of capitalism and class.

The musical is structured around a series of motives, as explored and analyzed by Stephen Banfield in his book *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals.* From the opening of Act I, Sondheim uses these motives to establish the importance of class within the world of *Sweeney Todd*. Both Antony and Todd sing the line, "There's no place like London," yet on the word "London," Antony's melody descends from B flat to G, matching the A flat nine chord in the harmonies, whereas Todd's descends from B flat to G flat, matching with the "Nemesis" motive.[103]

[103] Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals,* 295.

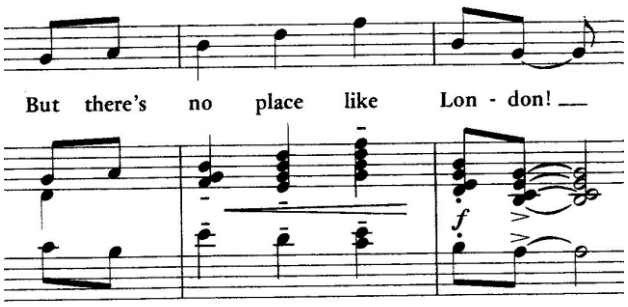

Figure 1: Antony sings about London, landing firmly on a chord tone.

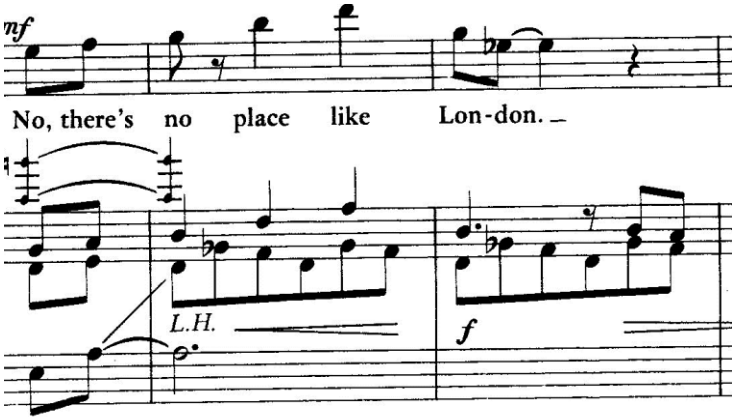

Figure 2: Todd repeats Antony's phrase, but moves down to a G flat, matching up with the beginning of the "Nemesis" motive in the accompaniment.

This motive appears throughout the work when Todd is taking revenge on the upper classes, and here, provides a foreboding tone to contrast him with the optimistic Antony. The use of the "Nemesis" motive instructs the audience that this is not going to be the London of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Figure 3: "Nemesis" motive as identified by Stephen Banfield. Although this motive appears mostly during "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," it also appears during times of violence throughout the play.

This contrast continues as Todd instructs the naïve sailor Antony in the ways of the world, singing in a recitative style centering on C sharp,

> There's a hole in the world like a great black pit,
> And the vermin of the world inhabit it,
> And its morals aren't worth what a pig could spit,
> And it goes by the name of London.
> At the top of the hole sit the privileged few,
> Making mock of the vermin in the lower zoo.[104]

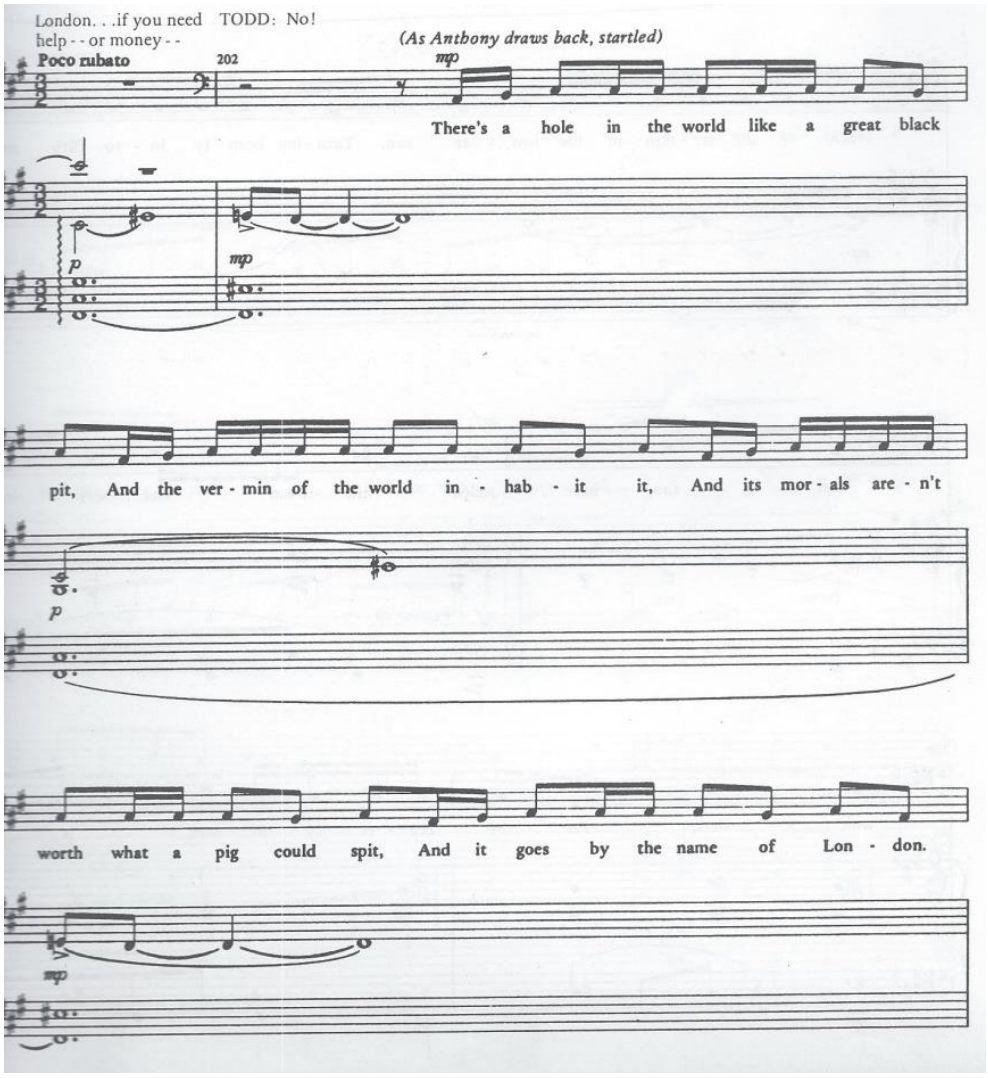

Figure 4: Todd's recitative as it first appears over block chords.

[104] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 26.

This recitative returns later in the play when Todd is justifying his mass murders in the song "Epiphany", except this time, rather than being accompanied by a simple chord, it is accompanied again by the "Nemesis" motive. This more firmly establishes his complaint with his desire to murder members of the bourgeoisie.[105] This musical gesture helps add credence to Todd's sudden urge to kill everyone, a plot point from Bond's play that Sondheim wished to expand upon.

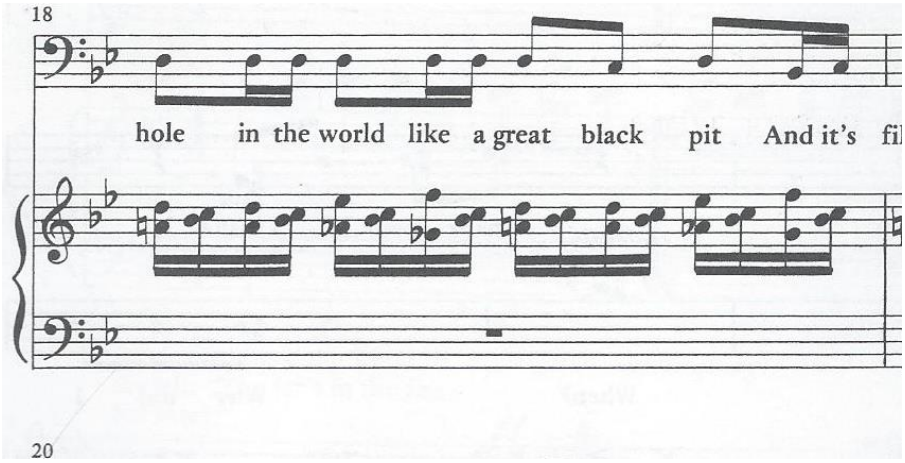

Figure 5: The "Nemesis" motive accompanies the return of Todd's recitative.

After the opening song about the horrible despair of London, Todd then launches into the first version of "A Barber and his Wife," which outlines the story of Todd's false imprisonment, and the audience learns why London is such a corrupt and vile place in Todd's view. While the audience does not know what has happened to Lucy until Mrs. Lovett's reprise of this song, Sondheim illustrates the abuse of privilege by immediately highlighting how devastating such exploitation can be. His point is further realized by the entrance of the beggar woman. She is portrayed as crazy and desperate, flirting inappropriately with all of the men and alternating between asking for alms in a slow,

[105] Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 295.

begging voice and asking them for sex, most likely having had to work as a prostitute, in a quicker melody that includes very blatant sexual innuendos, specifically Cockney slang, which represented in Victorian England the lowest, roughest class.[106] The beggar woman's music is a chromatic line downward, a figure that will be associated later with the Judge's lechery.

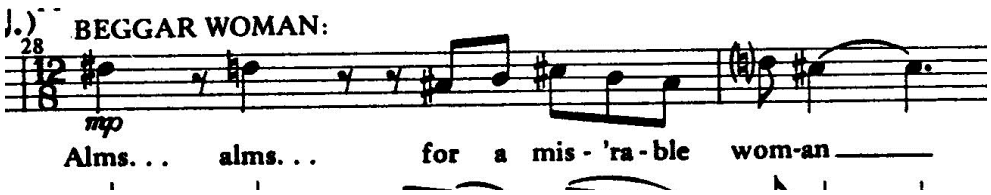

Figure 6: The beggar woman's chromaticism contrasts with the earlier diatonicism of Todd and Antony. Chromaticism appears throughout the musical a manifestation of bodily desire.

The problem of such stringent class relations, resulting from capitalism, and its devastating results is to the fore right from the beginning of the musical.

Next, the audience meets Mrs. Lovett, who presents a particularly complicated case of capitalist abuse. On the one hand, she is clearly motivated by greed and the desire to gain class mobility and material wealth; on the other hand, she is a victim of an economic and political system that make it difficult for her to have any sort of class mobility. When the audience first encounters Mrs. Lovett, Sondheim presents her as a sympathetic victim who is not talented enough, nor has enough initial capital, to move up in the world. Through her song "The Worst Pies in London," the audience learns that she is struggling financially because of her inability to make quality pies. Her song alternates

[106] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.vv. "Cockney," http://dictionary.oed.com/ (accessed April 29, 2013).

between rapid, patter-song off the beat and a slower lament. The contrast of the two styles helps to create sympathy towards Mrs. Lovett. The faster sections show that she is a hard worker through the use of diegetic noises and the actual work it takes to perform such a fast song; the slower sections, where she insults her own cooking, illustrate her feelings of desperation through consonant G flat major harmonies and a melody which repeats an appoggiatura on the down beat of each measure, a figure which often recalls a sigh.

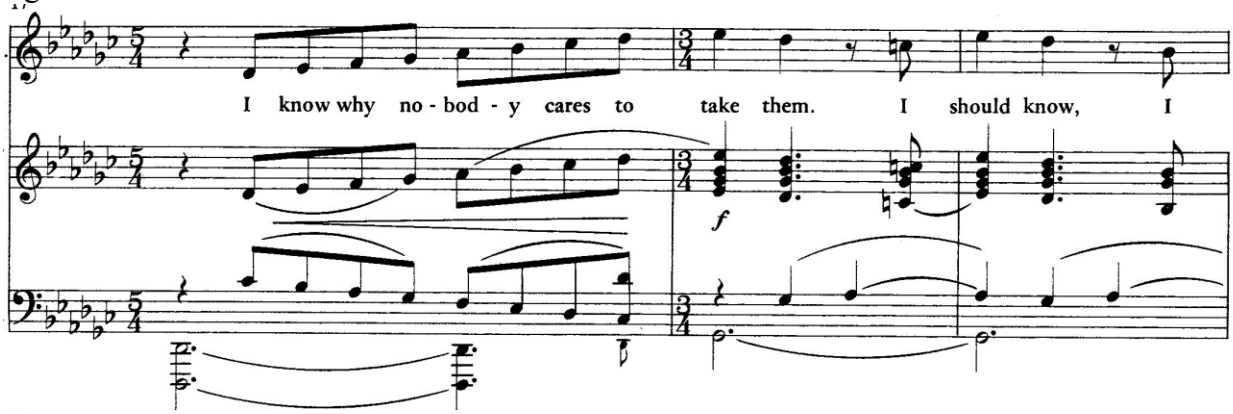

Figure 7: Mrs. Lovett's sighing appoggiaturas in the ¾ section afford her sympathy from the audience for her difficult situation and inability to sell pies.

She complains, "And no wonder with the price of meat what it is/when you get it/never thought I'd see the day/ men'd think it was a treat finding poor animals/ wot are dying in the street."[107]

[107] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 37.

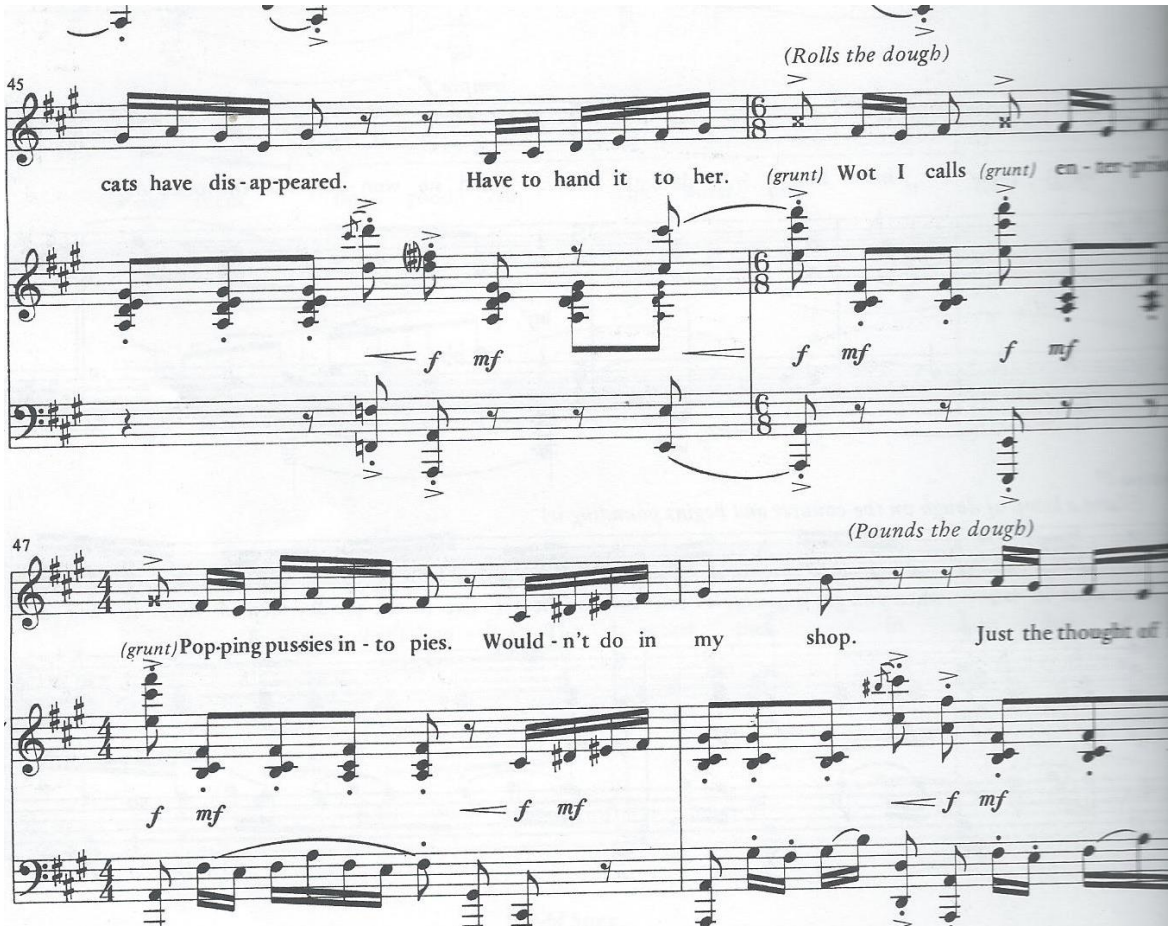

Figure 8: The grunts and pounding of the dough on the downbeats highlights Mrs. Lovett's working class status through gestus, whereas her frantic runs show her desperation.

As is later proven in the musical when she gets her hands on a higher quality of meat, Mrs. Lovett struggles to make better pies because she does not have adequate supplies. Sondheim then juxtaposes her with a Mrs. Mooney, to whom Mrs. Lovett refers again in the song "A Little Priest." Mrs. Lovett sings,

> Mrs. Mooney has a pie shop,
> Does her business, but I notice something weird:
> Lately all her neighbors' cats have disappeared.
> Have to hand it to her
> Wot I calls enterprise,
> Popping pussies into pies.

Wouldn't do in my shop.
Just the thought of it's enough to make you sick.
And I'm telling you, them pussy cats is quick.[108]

These lines foreshadow Mrs. Lovett's future actions. By juxtaposing her with Mrs. Mooney, who uses cats in pies, the audience sees Mrs. Lovett as more ethical than Mrs. Mooney, more willing to accept her fate. She works as she sings, interspersing diegetic smacks of her rolling pin on empty down beats, and then quickly pattering on the off beats, highlighting her hard, honest work. However, the lines "Wot I calls enterprise," and "And I'm telling you, them pussy cats is quick" both subtly imply that she would also put cats in her pies if she were able. This desire foretells her use of human meat in future pies. She is presented initially as a sympathetic, if not pitiful, victim of laissez-faire capitalism, the type proposed by neoliberal economists in the 1970s; however, as these last lines hint, she will soon be revealed as morally corrupt, willing to sacrifice human decency for money.[109] Her character is a smaller representation of a larger issue within the musical: Abuse of power and money leads the desperate lower classes to commit crimes for survival, yet the lines between crimes of survival, crimes of anger and revenge, and crimes of greed are often blurry and unclear. Mrs. Lovett needs money to eat and to survive; yet she also wants more money to partake in the extravagant lifestyle of the bourgeoisie, and she is willing to commit criminal acts to accumulate the necessary wealth.

Sondheim puts class difference into the music with the use of dance topics. He uses the minuet and the waltz to demarcate class hierarchy. The minuet appears in Mrs. Lovett's version of "Poor Thing," when Lucy, Sweeney Todd's wife, goes to Judge

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[108] Ibid., 38.

[109] Her greed is blatantly outlined during her dialogue with Todd after he has murdered Pirelli. "Mrs. Lovett: You're crazy mad! Killing a man wot done you now harm?...Todd: He tried to blackmail me, half my earnings forever…Mrs. Lovett: Oh well, that's a different matter!...[*She looks in Pirelli's purse*] Three quid! Well, waste not, want not, as I always say" (Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 156).

Turpin's party where she is brutally raped by the Judge. The score says, "Meno mosso – Minuet," and the stage directions state, "The shadowy figures have assembled. They are dancing a slow minuet as the Beadle leads the wife through them."[110] For four measures, the music switches to a refined imitation of a classical minuet, which is voiced by orchestrator Jonathan Tunick in the strings with a reduced texture, connoting the Classical era.

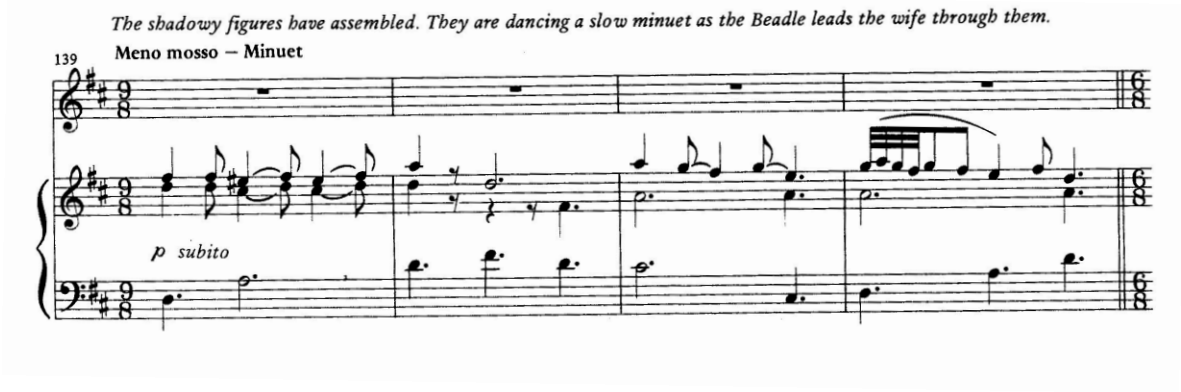

Figure 9: The song switches to a minuet in D for four measures as the Beadle leads Lucy through the crowd of bourgeois party guests.

Wye Jamison Allanbrook, in *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart,* explains how dance topics were used in the Classical era, around the supposed time of the original Sweeney Todd legend, to denote to listeners' specific class references. The minuet was "the epitome of choreographic elegance and refinement."[111] Prince emphasizes this point in the work by having the members of the chorus engage in minuet-style dancing. The restrained minuet introduces the scene where Lucy's rape occurs, arguably the most egregious abuse of class privilege in the work. The use of the minuet creates a feeling of

[110] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 47.
[111] Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*: Le nozza di Figaro *and* Don Giovanni (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983), 33.

irony and hypocrisy, when the symbol of upper class refinement and restraint becomes the soundtrack for the unrestrained lust of Judge Turpin.

The most blatant critique of class and capitalism occurs in arguably the best-known song from the musical, "A Little Priest." In the song, Mrs. Lovett's devious, materialistic, cannibalistic plot is revealed to Todd. As Gordon points out,

> The implicit corruption [Todd] has detected in all his experiences has finally been given clear expression. The exploitation and abuse at the core of his society is given concrete form in Mrs. Lovett's plan, the perversion of the social contract and the breakdown of all fellow feeling fittingly symbolized by the capitalistic cannibalism she proposes.[112]

Sung as a duet between Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney Todd, the song uses the metaphor of cannibalism to critique a large number of specific occupations, including lawyers, priests, and politicians. The most scathing critiques are reserved for these bourgeois occupations, calling politicians "oily" and noting that when one eats lawyer, one should "order something else though to follow/since no one should swallow it twice."[113] More obvious critiques of capitalist structures occur in between the occupational sections, including, "It's man devouring man, my dear/and who are we to deny it here?"[114] and the most salient,

> The history of the world, my love…
> Is those below serving those up above.
> How gratifying for once to know
> That those above will serve those down below.[115]

Todd sings these lines to a typical waltz melody, alternating with Mrs. Lovett's quicker counter melody. He and Mrs. Lovett come together on the final line, where they deviate from the expected waltz harmony on the final syllable of "below." Rather than staying

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[112] Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 237.
[113] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 191.
[114] Ibid., 186.
[115] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 195-196.

on the third or descending to the tonic, Mrs. Lovett descends to a C sharp, clashing with Todd's B, creating a sense of unease within the seemingly familiar waltz style.

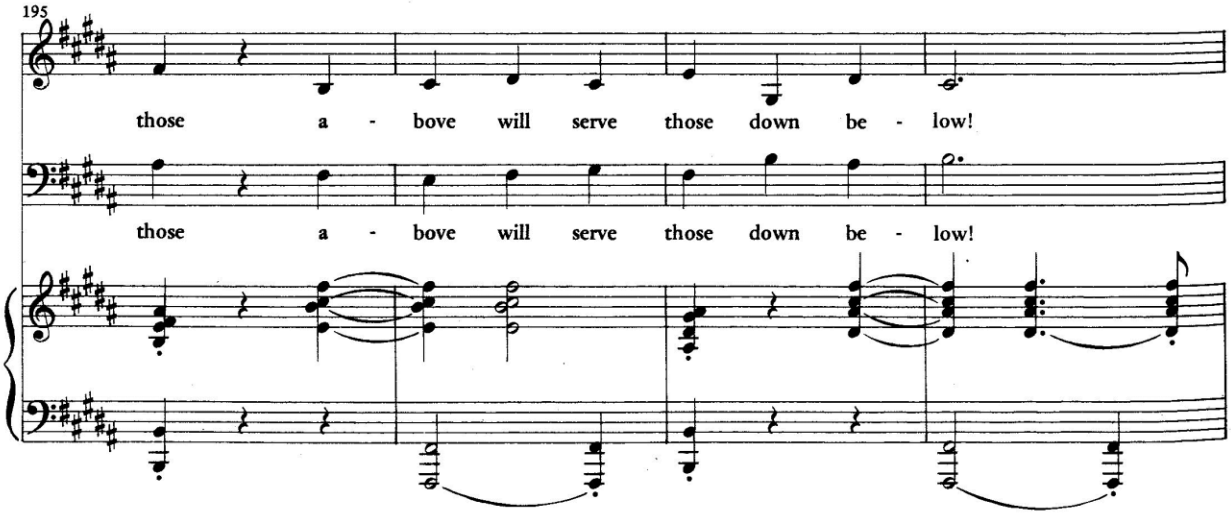

Figure 10: Todd's line on the bottom resolves correctly, up to the tonic, but Mrs. Lovett's resolves to the second degree, creating a feeling of unease and incompleteness, underlying the uncanny subject of the waltz.

These lines illustrate Todd's own disdain towards the upper class and his realization that the upper class is able to abuse the lower classes because of the work of the proletariat. The upper class and bourgeoisie are only able to function because they are being served by the lower classes.[116] It is also within this song that Mrs. Lovett's reference to Mrs. Mooney reoccurs, using her to justify their use of human flesh within their meat pies. Both Todd and Mrs. Lovett see the materialist opportunities available to them now that they are able to acquire sufficient supplies for her meat pies, but inseparable from their want of money is their desire and desperation to even the score with the upper classes.

[116] He uses this realization as justification for the mass murders he is going to commit in the number before this entitled "Epiphany." He recites, "The all deserve to die!/Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett, tell you why:/ Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett,/ There are two kinds of men, and only two./ There's the one staying put in his proper place/And the one with his foot in the other one's face…the lives of the wicked should be made brief/For the rest of us, death will be a relief!" (Sondheim 173-175).

Both of these motivations are an intricate part of the story for Sondheim, complicating the audience's moral perceptions of the characters.

Here again, Sondheim uses the dance topic of the waltz to emphasize Mrs. Lovett's and Todd's lower class status. The waltz occurs during the occupational critique section of "A Little Priest." Although not spelled out in the score or stage directions, like the previous minuet, the waltz is clearly implied through the ¾ time signature and the use of the "oom-pah-pah" figure so prevalent in 18th and 19th century waltzes.

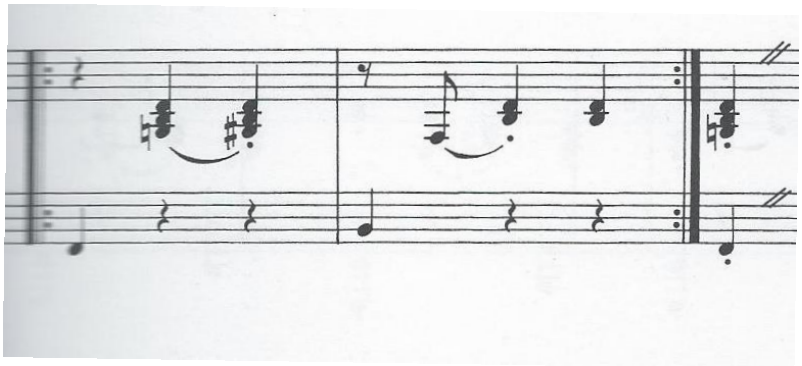

Figure 11: The constant typical waltz accompaniment in "A Little Priest" encourages association with 19th-century middle and working class dances.

The dance, however, is given in the stage directions during the reprise of this song in the final scene, which state, "They [Todd and Lovett] begin to waltz."[117] According to Allanbrook, the waltz began as a "peasant" and "rustic" dance, deemed inappropriate for the upper classes.[118] The waltz gained popularity throughout the late 18th and the 19th centuries as the bourgeoisie became more prominent. Because it was easier to dance than the minuet, the less educated and refined middle classes could also participate.[119]

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[117] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 357.
[118] Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart,* 66.
[119] Eric McKee, *Decorum of the Minuet, Delirium of the Waltz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 91.

However, it still held onto its licentious, lower class connotations well into the 19th century, specifically as the Viennese waltz was quicker, and therefore, required the partners to be closer.[120] It is appropriate, then, that a waltz would be used by the two lower class characters' to cruelly mock the bourgeoisie and upper classes.

The use of the factory whistle and other diegetic sounds are also ways that Sondheim subtly hints at industrialization throughout the play. The factory whistle is first heard after the organ prelude to initiate the start of the production, and the whistle continues to be used throughout the play, particularly at times of extreme emotional distress. It abruptly interrupts the action, often startling the audience. As Gordon has observed, "the hard shrill of the factory whistle suggests unambiguously the unremitting oppression of economic power."[121] The whistle represents the factory overseer, the upper classes, and the subjugation of the proletariat. By using the whistle rather than a scream, the audience is brought back into the world of Victorian England and the oppression of working class during the industrial revolution.

Diegetic sounds are also used as a type of Brechtian *gestus* specifically in "Johanna – Act II Sequence," where Todd sings of missing Johanna while murdering his victims.[122] As Joy Calico has summarized, "'Gests' are stylized behaviors designed to reveal the socially constructed nature of human interaction."[123] Brecht used gestus to highlight the fact that our actions are determined by structures larger than ourselves and our own free will. Specifically about music, he wrote, "Gestic music is that music which

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120 Eduard Reeser, *The History of the Waltz* (Stockholm: The Continental Book Company, 1949), 19.
121 Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 212.
122 *Gestus* is an acting technique created by Brecht for his Epic Theatre. He believed that actors should not just reveal the subconscious of their characters, but also use gestures to underline the social, historical, and material motivations behind their actions. Their gestures reflect causality, not just motivation.
123 Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008), 8.

allows the actor to exhibit certain basic gests on stage."[124] Also, as Calico further suggests of Brechtian practice, mimesis is the direct link between gestus and art.[125] During "Johanna", Sondheim uses the diegetic noise of throat slitting and the dumping of the chair in time with the music, to illustrate the gestus of each act. The gestus is then intensified by the calm and soothing music. The detached, apathetic singing of Todd in comparison with his violent gestures makes them seem even more the inevitable product of his treatment by the other classes.[126] This same stylized movement is used by Mrs. Lovett in "The Worst Pies in London," during which she uses her rolling pin in time with the rests and greatly exaggerates her work, as discussed previously.

Prince's sets were also influenced by the legacy of Brecht. Visible stage machinery which exposes the technology of the theatre was an essential part of Epic theatre processes.[127] Prince created a smaller, cube-like set, which could be pushed around in a circle by stage hands in front of the audience, dispelling the theatrical illusion. Surrounding the smaller, intimate set within which most of the action takes place, are larger, industrial components which "show the Industrial Revolution as something that dwarfed and degraded everything it touched."[128] The play begins with "a huge drop, depicting the intricate social order of nineteenth-century England…[hanging] above the forestage. A couple of gravediggers enter and begin to shovel dirt as, to the piercing shriek of a factory whistle, two workers pull down the drop."[129] Right from the beginning, Prince's set combines with the factory whistle to signal class inequality during

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[124] Calico, *Brecht at the Opera,* 68.
[125] Calico, *Brecht at the Opera,* 8.
[126] This song will be discussed in further detail in chapter 4.
[127] Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 255-256.
[128] Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim,* 296.
[129] Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 211.

Victorian England, and the actors themselves do the work on stage, alluding to the work of Brecht's epic theatre.

Musicals obviously all contain music that interrupts the scene and dispels realism. Brecht used music to interrupt a scene and comment on the action, dispelling the realism of the theatre and allowing for participant observation.[130] Sondheim's uses a Greek style chorus to fulfill this function in *Sweeney Todd*. The chorus frames the work, and the action is interrupted throughout by commentary from the chorus.[131] This framing is not part of Bond's play, but an element created by Sondheim.[132] The chorus breaks the fourth wall, another Brechtian technique, from when they sing the very first line: "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd."[133] This line addresses the audience directly and lets them know that what is happening on stage is not real, but a story. The chorus again and again breaks the action at moments of climax to address the audience with what sounds like generic urban legend lines, such as "He seldom laughed, but he often smiled," or "he never forgot and never forgave."[134] The use of story-telling through the chorus also exemplifies didacticism, something common in Brechtian works, ending the musical with, "To seek revenge may lead to hell./Everyone does it, if seldom as well/As Sweeny Todd."[135] The chorus begins and ends the work with strong Brechtian implications, yet without the "soap-boxing" Sondheim was attempting to avoid.

Although Sondheim and Prince were light-handed in their use of Brechtian techniques, critics such as Stanley Kauffman and Clive Barnes compared Sondheim's works unfavorably to Brecht, implying that Sondheim was trying to mimic Epic Theatre

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130 Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker,* 255-256.
131 Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 246.
132 Ibid., 215.
133 Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 4.
134 Ibid., 60.
135 Ibid., 374.

rather than just suggest it.[136] Sondheim was not attempting to create a Brechtian polemic, but rather, was attempting to use economic politics as a way to focus the story into a single theme of revenge on individuals enabled by larger sociopolitical structures. These critics also dismiss or do not address the many non-Brechtian elements of the play, including the melodramatic and horror elements, as well as the fact that, for example, it is clearly designed for catharsis, something Brecht would have despised.

By focusing on how the actors are in many ways victims and victimizers trapped within a larger, rigid social structure, Prince and Sondheim were able to create a complex story which explains, yet does not justify, the heinous acts of its protagonists. The book writer, Hugh Wheeler, said, "The hardest thing of all was how to take these two really disgusting people and write them in such a way that the audience can rather love them."[137] Gordon explains, "[Sweeney is] a god of wrath, corrupted by his own righteousness. His suffering and fury are the consequence of horrendous social conditions, but transcend that particular time and place."[138] *Sweeney Todd*, although a depiction of Victorian England, rang true to audiences in the 1970s facing extreme economic uncertainty under the weight of American Imperialist endeavors and globalization, to social structures outside of most people's control. Perhaps the moral lesson of *Sweeney Todd* is as critic Robert L. McLaughlin writes, "Like Sweeney, we respond to the forces that victimize us by becoming like them," and only by breaking outside of such oppressive structures can real social change be enacted.

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136 Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 252.
137 Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim,* 292.
138 Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy,* 253.

Chapter 4

Johanna: A Case Study for Marxist Feminism

"I feel you, Johanna
And one day, I'll steal you."[139]

"Johanna, Johanna/I'll keep you here forever,
I'll wed you on the morrow."[140]

"Goodbye, Johanna.
You're gone and yet you're mine."[141]

The poor treatment of women and the traffic of women as commodities are central to the plot of *Sweeney Todd*. In many ways, Judge Turpin's view of Lucy as an object to have and use is what spurred the entire tragic story of Sweeney Todd in Christopher Bond's play. Sondheim reinforces this notion by using Johanna as the central object around which the main male characters negotiate the story, both in music and narrative. Although the poor treatment of women as a result of capitalism is fundamental for all of the women characters, this chapter will focus on Johanna, specifically within the three songs entitled "Johanna," each sung by one of the three main male characters. These songs are an example of how Marxist ideals, specifically feminist Marxist ideals, permeate the story and necessitate a reevaluation of the moral implications within Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*.

Marxism, although recognizing women's oppression within the familial unit, had long subsumed any sort of sex oppression under the larger umbrella of class

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[139] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 78-79.
[140] Ibid., 386.
[141] Ibid., 248-249.

oppression.[142] The family was the ultimate representation of private property. Marx states in *Private Property and Communism* that "Marriage…is incontestably a form of *exclusive private property*," meaning that marriage represents the ownership of a woman and any of her offspring by a man, the foundational element of private property.[143] Friedrich Engels expanded on this concept in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* where he highlighted "how women's social position declined as private property gained strength as an organizing principle of society."[144] Engels theorized that as private property began to become more common, women began to be viewed more as property than as an equal, although different, participant in the family unit. Engels also distinguished sex relations from production relations, a move more radical than that of Marx.[145] However, Engels eventually subsumed sexuality and the oppression of women into modes of production, once again privileging class oppression over gender oppression.[146] Although Marxism recognized the oppression of women through objectification, commodification, and marriage, it did not allow space for a separate movement or search for any answers about women's oppression outside of the capitalist system. It is not coincidence, however, that Engels's landmark work on the family was republished in English with a new translation in 1972, as the second-wave feminist movement in the United States reached its peak.[147]

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[142] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 160.
[143] Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 110.
[144] Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 212.
[145] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 164.
[146] Ibid., 168-169.
[147] Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978).
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It is necessary, then, to look at the role gender plays in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and the treatment of women in order to see how the capitalist tragedy plays out on all levels of the story. As Marxist ideas permeated the various social movements of the New Left in the 1970s, many women began to find feminism necessary to battle sexism within these movements. Lydia Sargent, in her introduction to *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, states, "The project of socialist feminism should be to combine the insights of Marxism and feminism into a unified theory which can understand capitalist patriarchy as a single system in which the oppression of women is a core attribute."[148] Within this framework, it is impossible to fully understand the nature of class oppression without looking at the role of women. Capitalism both is supported by and supports patriarchy and the oppression of women, and socialist feminists did not believe that Engels had gone far enough. Gayle Rubin, in her landmark essay "The Traffic in Women," claims that Engels does not recognize "the mutual interdependence of sexuality, economics, and politics," and she and other socialist feminists found it necessary to rework the Marxist frame in order to fully understand this system.[149] One of the most significant manifestations of the parallels between gender oppression and class oppression is through objectification: workers are objectified by capitalists and women are objectified by men.[150] Therefore, the objectification of Johanna by the male characters of the story is central to understanding the full weight of the anti-capitalist critique.

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[148]Lydia Sargent, "Introduction: New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over," in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981), xxiii.
[149] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 210.
[150] Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 230-231.

Marxist feminists often discussed the role female objectification, especially in marriage, as a foundational tenet of women's oppression. Rubin believes that "the ultimate locus of women's oppression [is] within the traffic in women, rather than within the traffic in merchandise," moving the normal Marxist emphasis from materialism to gender.[151] Rubin cites earlier work done by Claude Lévi-Strauss on the role of gift exchange in societies as a way for men to interact with one another and form bonds, and those gifts often included women.[152] She explains, "Marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange in which it is women who are the most precious gifts."[153] Although women are more "precious" than other types of gifts, they are still exchanged as gifts through the institution of marriage, particularly in post-industrialist bourgeois society.

In order to understand how Johanna is being objectified, I will use the detailed analyses of objectification in Martha Nussbaum's *Sex and Social Justice* and Rae Langton's *Sexual Solipsism*. Martha Nussbaum states, "Objectification entails making into a thing, treating as a thing, something that is really not a thing."[154] Here, the emphasis is on the treatment of the woman by men, not on the men's thoughts. Langton expands on Nussbaum's theory, however, by further emphasizing the intentions of the man, specifically in relation to the issue of autonomy. She distinguishes between the "violation of autonomy", meaning a person recognizes that someone has the right to make her own decisions, but then uses force to make her do something else, and objectification as a "non-attribution of autonomy," meaning that the person does not

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151 Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 175.
152 Ibid., 171.
153 Ibid., 173.
154 Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Chapter 8: Objectification," in *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218.

recognize the other person's right to make her own decisions.[155] Here, the emphasis is on how the person thinks about someone else, rather than his actions. From these two definitions Nussbaum creates a list of seven ways to objectify someone and Langton adds on three more. Nussbaum's list includes instrumentality (treating someone as a means to an end or a tool), denial of autonomy, inertness (lack of activity, or even lack of agency), fungibility (the object is interchangeable with another object), violability (non-recognition of boundaries, also able to be broken), ownership, and denial of subjectivity (non-recognition of someone's feelings).[156] Langton adds reduction to the body or body parts, reduction to appearance, and silencing of the person.[157] Both Nussbaum and Langton make it clear that this list is not exhaustive nor, as a cluster concept, do all of these qualities have to exist for a person to be objectified; each situation is unique. However, this list will be helpful in understanding specifically how it is that Johanna is objectified in *Sweeney Todd.*

Johanna's objectification may not seem obviously apparent to most audiences, as she speaks no objections about her treatment by Antony.[158] Langton points out that "when object-hood is project onto women, women not only seem more object-like, but are made to become more object-like."[159] Because she is treated as an object not just by the villain (Turpin), but by the ambiguous (Todd) and most of all, the hero (Antony), her objectification is treated as the status quo and barely challenged throughout the play. In fact, she is not given the space to complain. Silence is an important characteristic that

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155 Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233.
156 Nussbaum , "Chapter 8: Objectification," 218.
157 Langton, *Sexual Solipsism,* 228-229.
158 She does complain about her treatment by Judge Turpin, and her one song is about how she is like a caged bird, owned by the Judge. However, most audiences assume she is supposed to complain about him. After all, he is the villain.
159 Langton , *Sexual Solipsism,*12.

signals objectification.[160] While Johanna sings only one song by herself and one partial duet, she has three songs sung *about* her, four if Turpin and Todd's duet, "Pretty Women," is also counted as being about her. The objectification and subordination of women is "partly constituted by the fact that women have been silenced."[161] It is her silence, her lack of say in her situation that enables her to be used and owned by men for their own means.

The first "Johanna" heard by audiences is sung by the hero, Antony. He sees Johanna in the window and immediately falls for her. He does not speak with her. He does hear her, however, as she sings about feeling like a captive, metaphorically like a kept bird. It is important to note that this is Johanna's only significant number, and she sings about how she wishes to escape from the Judge or learn how to be happy with him. Antony responds with a song of his own, one which is very possessive. He tells Johanna "one day, I'll steal you," implying that she is something that can be "owned", and therefore lacks autonomy and free will.[162] Nussbaum uses both ownership and denial of autonomy as signs of objectification. Antony sings variations of this line repetitively throughout his song, often imitating the original and fundamental motive on the word "Johanna," which contains an upward, pulling, lustful force from the dissonance between the B flat and C.

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[160] Ibid., 13.
[161] Ibid., 229.
[162] Sondheim , *Sweeney Todd,* 77.

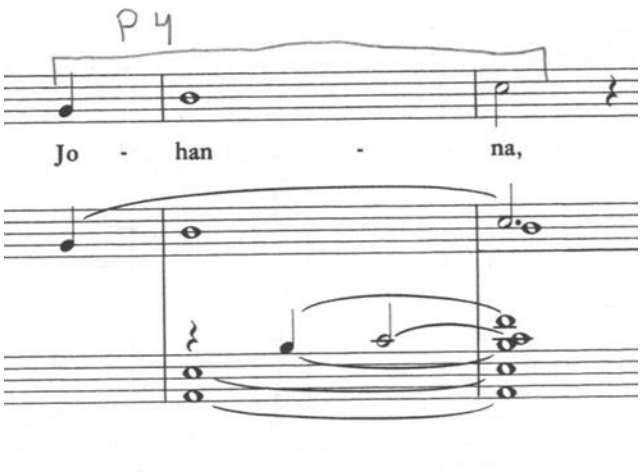

Figure 12: Antony's "Johanna" motive outlines a perfect fourth, which is drawn to the C on the last syllable by the appearance of the tone two beats earlier in the accompaniment, creating a sense of desire.

The implication of ownership is further supported when he sings quickly, "Do they think that walls can hide you?", "they" meaning the Judge and his evil henchman, the Beadle.[163] This implies that the Judge currently owns her, and Antony is going to steal her from the Judge. The last instance of objectification occurs in the only line he sings that describes her, "Buried sweetly in your yellow hair," which occurs at the climax of the piece, over lush romantic chords, giving a sensual, maybe even sexual, implication to this line.[164]

[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid., 78.

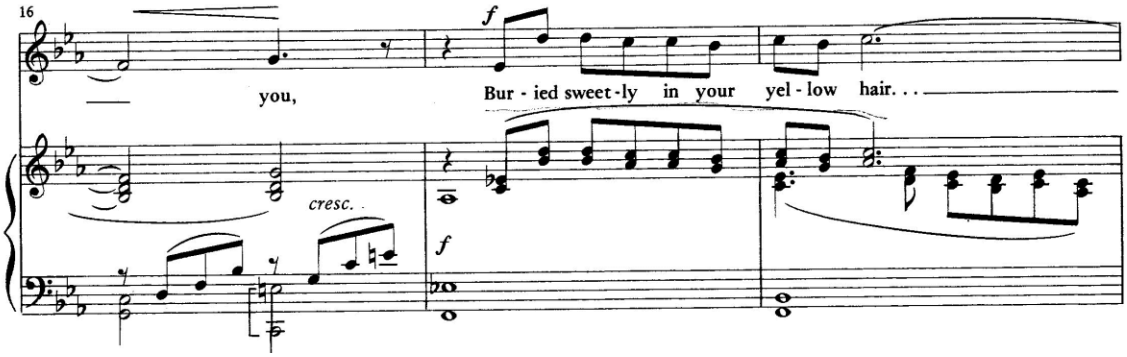

Figure 13: Antony's *forte* line is accompanied by parallel thirds, creating a lush texture reminiscent of sentimental romanticism, underlying the projection of his will onto Johanna.

This line is an example of what Langton calls reduction to body parts. Johanna's hair is a feature that reoccurs often in the musical, and this physical feature is what attracts Antony to her, not her personality or her values.

His notion to "steal" Johanna becomes more troubling when one considers that he has not yet asked what she wants. Langton emphasizes that objectification occurs not just when men possess or use women, but also when they project their desires onto the desires of women;[165] Antony's assumption, then, that Johanna wants to go with him is an example of him projecting his wishes onto her. His desire may appear to audiences as innocent, as later, in the song "Kiss Me," Johanna sings lyrically, in a *cantabile* style, "Sir, I did love you/even as I saw you,/even as it did not matter that I did not know your name."[166]

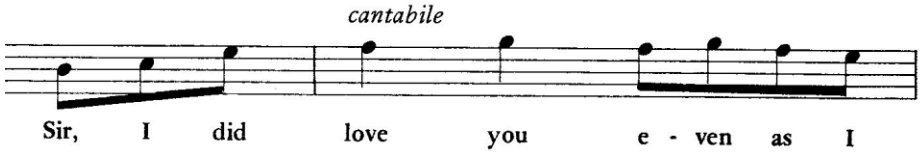

Figure 14: Johanna's line during "Kiss Me", sung sweetly, in contrast to her frantic chatter during the rest of the song, implies that she wants to go with Antony.

[165] Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*, 12.
[166] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 135.

This momentary love song, however, is framed by a more frantic and scattered rambling about how afraid she is of the Judge and how she is going to die if she has to marry him.[167]

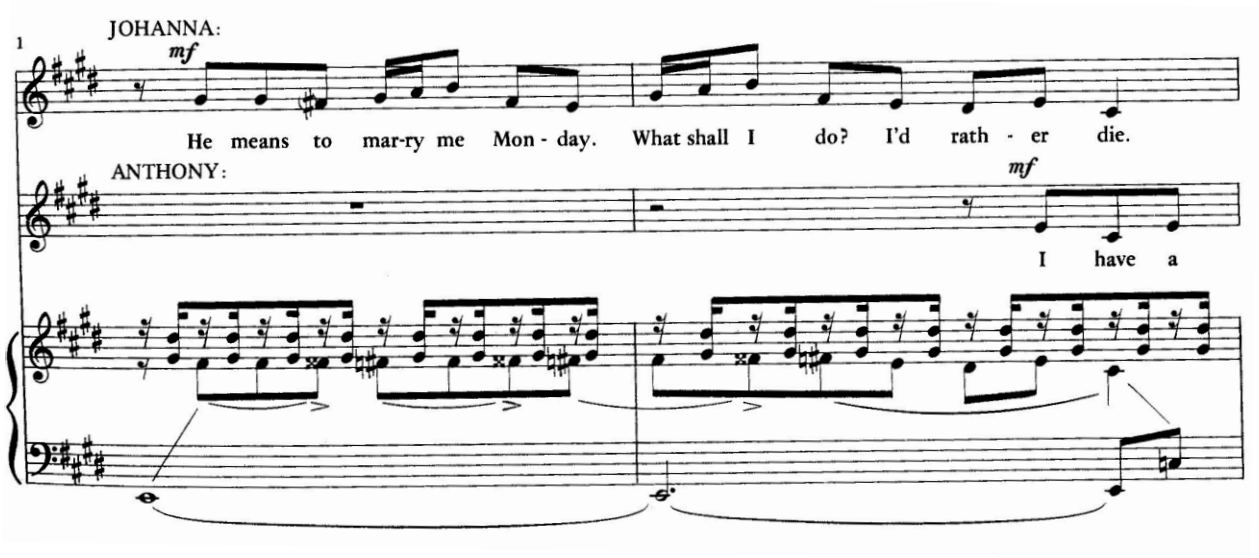

Figure 15: Johanna sings frantically about her lack of options in the song "Kiss Me."

Therefore, Johanna's options are kill herself or run away with Antony; the winner is clear. Langton asserts that this type of situation "presents a deeper damage to autonomy, a snuffing out of the capacity for choice; or a stifling of that capacity, if it is prevented from growing in the first place."[168] Women will sometimes behave in a way that confirms projections to avoid violent physical or emotional consequences.[169] Johanna may even believe that she loves Antony, yet she has never been allowed to make her own decisions, as she belongs to the Judge as his property, first as his ward and as he presumes later, his bride.

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[167] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 131.
[168] Langton, *Sexual Solipsism,* 236.
[169] Ibid., 264.

Judge Turpin sings his version of "Johanna" when he is looking through the peephole he has made into Johanna's room.[170] Right away, this is an example of Johanna's violability. Although he is not violating her body, like he did Lucy, he is violating her privacy. However, this violation has darker, more concrete undertones, as he has already raped Johanna's mother, indicating that he will likely rape again to get what he wants. The song focuses on his lustful feelings towards Johanna. Filled with hungry chromatic lines, the song is extremely sexual. His version of the "Johanna" motive is more condensed, with a stronger upward, chromatic movement from B flat to C and then D flat, outlining an unstable minor third, as the D flat is dissonant with the pedal C in the bass.

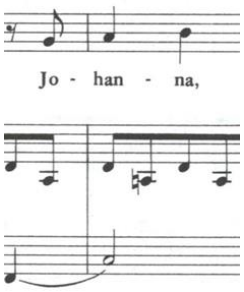

Figure 15: Judge Turpin's "Johanna" motive outlines a minor third between B flat and D flat, accompanied by tritone movement between Db and A, creating a restless and uneasy atmosphere.

Turpin alternates between singing about his lust for Johanna and asking for God to help him resist while he flogs himself in punishment. The words he sings are a clear example of reduction to the body and reduction to appearance. He sings, outlining the same minor third, then again transposed, how the light "penetrates her gown," how her

[170] This song is often cut for "reasons of time". However, both Stephen Sondheim and I agree that it is necessary to the show, and it is probably cut more for reasons of censorship than time. See Mark Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music,* 136-137.

"lips part…so young and soft a beautiful," and how she "tempts" him "with those quivering…" and he trails off, flogging himself out of guilt.[171]

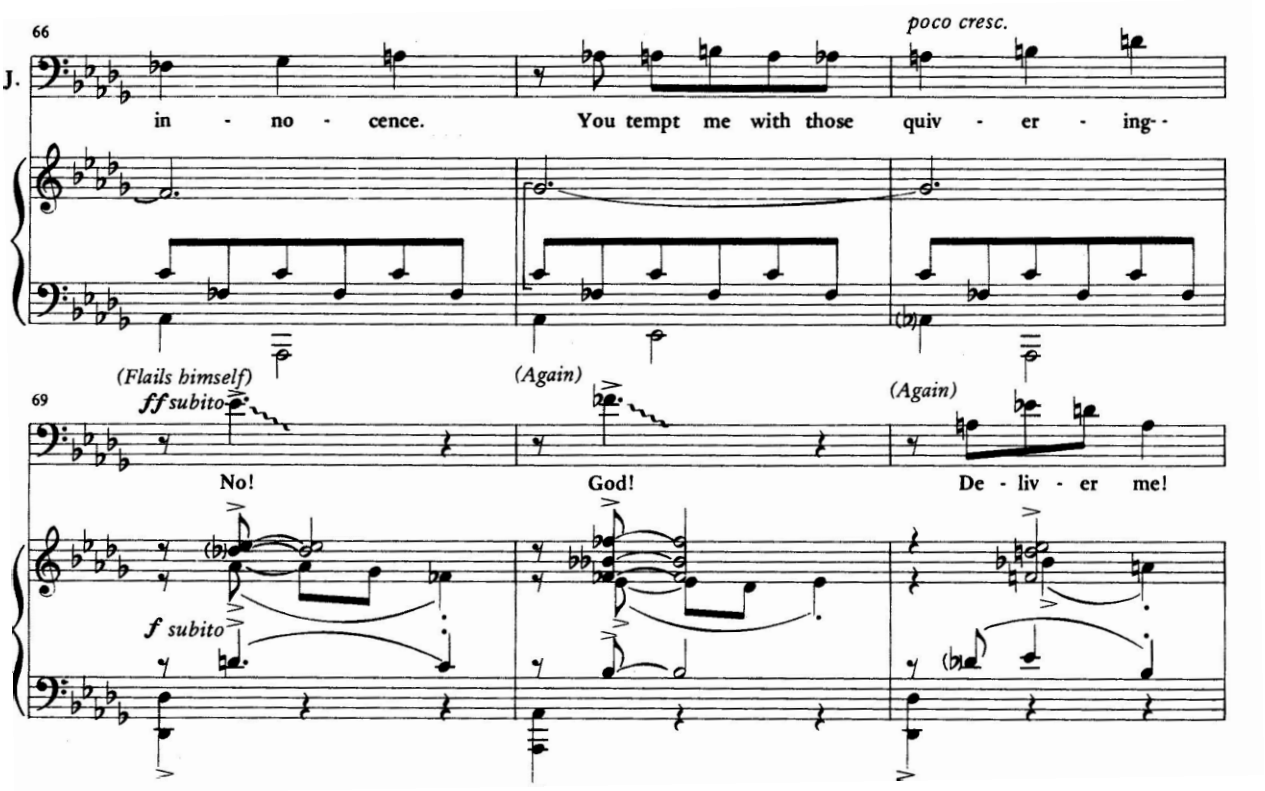

Figure 16: The Judge ascends with a lustful chromatic line and then abruptly, flails himself out of guilt for his feelings.

He then shows how he believes he has ownership for her by singing, "I cannot keep you longer."[172] His objectification of his ward is supposed to be obvious to the audience, and one of his main characteristics as a villain.

The song does not veil its sexuality. It even has a climax, when Turpin sings the word "God!!" on F4, a very high note for a bass, at the dynamic of *fff*. The stage directions here also indicate that Turpin himself should climax.

[171] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 378-382.
[172] Ibid., 383.

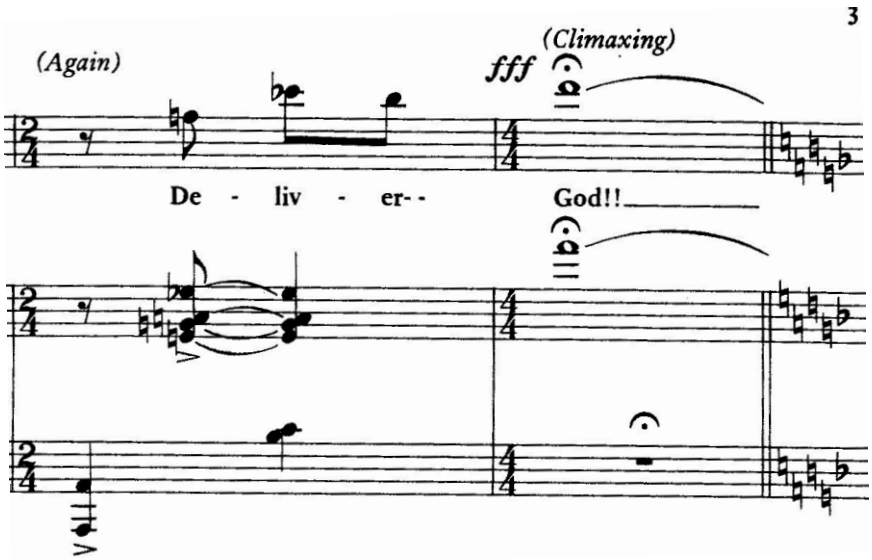

Figure 17: The Judge orgasms on stage while looking at Johanna. It is after this moment that he convinces himself it is his job to "save" Johanna.

The song then restarts softly in a similar fashion as the first section, but with a new feeling, as the accompaniment goes from quick moving eighth notes to supportive and more stable block chords. The conclusion he draws in this section is horrifying because of the complete denial of Johanna's autonomy. Turpin has convinced himself that Johanna needs protection from the licentiousness of other men and decides to marry her. The line "I cannot keep you longer," becomes "I'll keep you here forever."[173] He knows what her will is, but he denies it, recognizing her autonomy and then crushing it. There is also denial of subjectivity because he does not even conceive of the idea that Johanna might not want to marry him.[174] The last lines even show a hint of instrumentality when Turpin sings in a slow, descending chromatic line, coming to rest softly on the fifth of a minor/major seventh chord, "You'll deliver me, Johanna, from this hot, red devil with your soft white, cool virgin palms…"[175] This is actually the II chord of the key, B flat

[173] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 383.
[174] In fact, he tells the Beadle later, "She showed a strange reluctance." (Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 130).
[175] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,* 389.

minor, which is implied by the downbeat of measure 154. This chord makes the listener extremely disconcerted and uncomfortable, as the listener expects the piece to end on the i chord. The unsettled feeling is amplified by the fact that the music stops completely here and is interrupted by a dialogue between the Judge and Johanna, a scene that does not even contain incidental music.

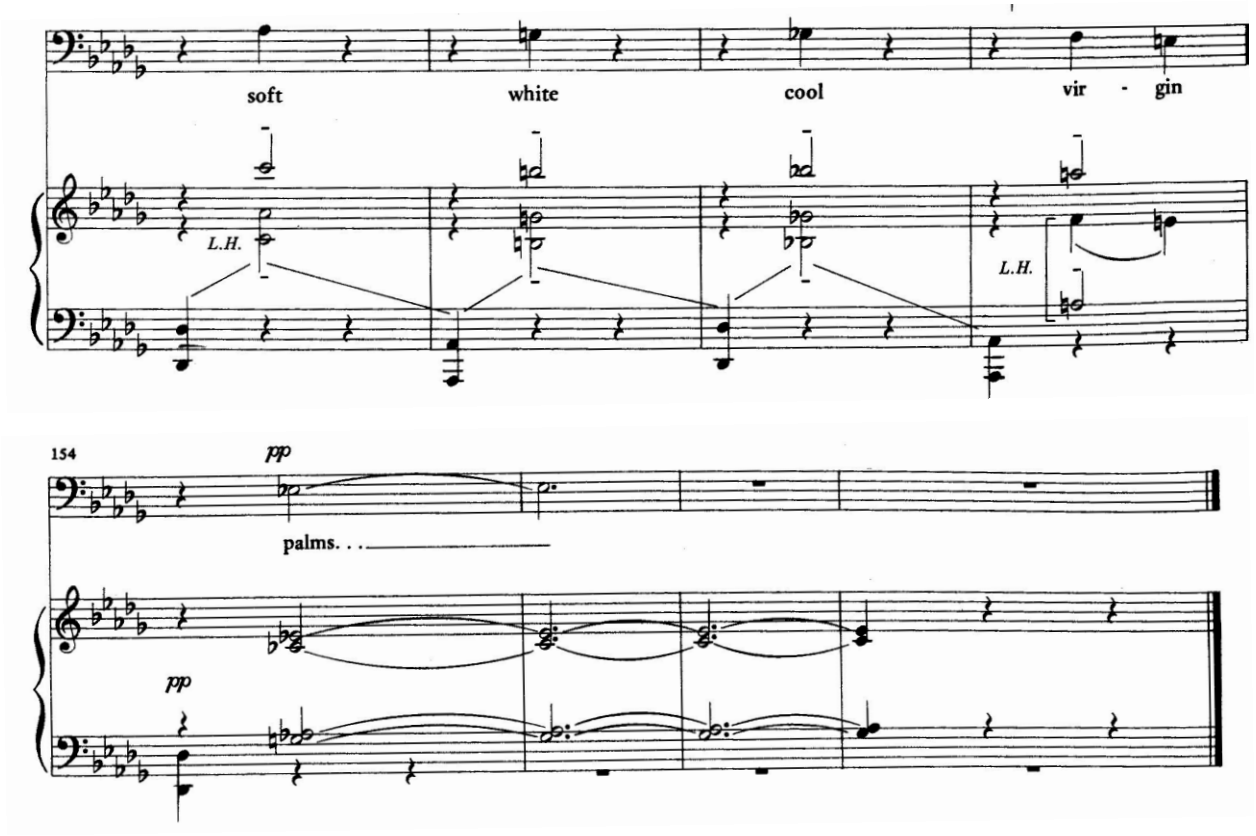

Figure 18: The Judge chromatically descends and comes to rest on the II7 chord, rather than the i chord, creating a feeling of unease.

He had been singing "God deliver me," but now he will use Johanna and his marriage to her to protect himself from God's law. The emphasis of her virginity in the last line of the song also emphasizes why she is so valuable to the Judge and able to redeem him in this way.[176] Langton notes that in the "sexual marketplace…virgins fetch a higher price

[176] The lack of virginity applied by "Mrs." Lovett signals why she is not a suitable replacement for Lucy in Todd's mind, as is apparent in "By the Sea."

than second hand goods."[177] This is a distinct attribute of women's worth during the nineteenth century and continues to have value well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This song is quite disturbing in light of the relationship between the Judge and Johanna (she calls him "father" throughout), as well as the Judge's rape of her mother. It seems, however, that the Judge is not the villain because of his objectification of women, as Antony, the hero, also objectifies Johanna. Instead, Turpin is the villain because of the obviously violent consequences that stem from his objectification of women.

Sweeney Todd's song about Johanna is quite different from the other two. Rather than conveying passionate desire, he is quite detached. Both the motive of Johanna's name in Antony's song and the Judge's convey an upward pull, suggesting a feeling of longing or want. Antony's seems more innocent, perhaps because of the perfect fourth, rather than the Judge's small, chromatic minor third which implies a lustful tone. Chromaticism is established at the beginning of the musical as signaling the sexual, as it is also present predominantly in the lines of the beggar woman, whose lines include many sexual innuendos. Also, unlike Antony's perfect fourth, which is harmonically fairly stable, with only a slight dissonance over a pedal tone, the Judge's second syllable on a C clashes with the D flat in the bass, pulling the tone up to the D flat. This upward pull in both songs indicates to the listener the men's desire to move forward, to act upon their feelings towards Johanna. Todd's version, however, is a rising perfect fifth that lacks the upward tonal pull of the other two motives.

[177] Langton, *Sexual Solipsism,* 221.

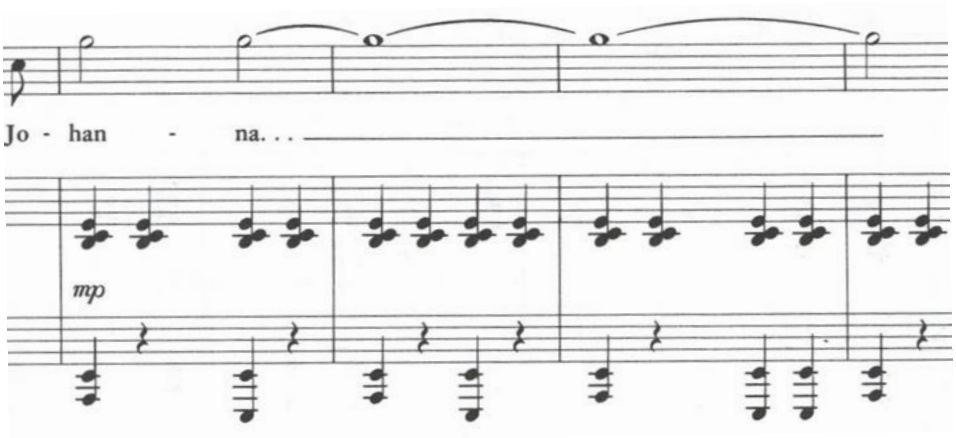

Figure 19: Todd's "Johanna" motive lands firmly on a chord tone on the second syllable, unlike Antony's and Turpin's, creating a sense of stability and passivity.

Todd is more content with his own version of Johanna, the small child. However, the relaxing, methodical plodding of this quaint song is starkly juxtaposed with Todd's actions, as Todd is violently killing his victims while he sings. The contrast between the passiveness of the song and Todd's voice with the viciousness of his actions is one that emphasizes Todd's acceptance of never seeing Lucy or Johanna again. The contrast also highlights the absurdity of his revengeful actions, as he is not actually killing those who wronged him but instead, innocent bystanders. This indifference is emphasized by the fairly stable harmonies that prolong the I chord, as the bass alternates between V and I. The song, which lacks tonal pull, is instead driven forward through the addition of more notes in the harmony. This creates direction that is unrelated to harmonic pull, which avoids implying sexual desire. However, the invasiveness of Todd's killing hints towards sexual sadism, one that is amplified with his invocation of Johanna.[178] I am not claiming that Todd has incestuous feelings towards Johanna, but the exchangeability between Lucy and Johanna in Todd's mind suggests, like in Turpin's world, Johanna is somehow a

[178] Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 64.

substitute for the missing Lucy, and perhaps his violence is a way of seeking emotional and sexual release.[179]

Throughout the song, Todd refers to the similarities between Johanna and Lucy.[180] He plods passively up and down an A flat major scale, stable and diatonic (in contrast to the Judge's chromatic, minor melody), "Are you beautiful and pale, with yellow hair, like her?" her referring to Lucy.

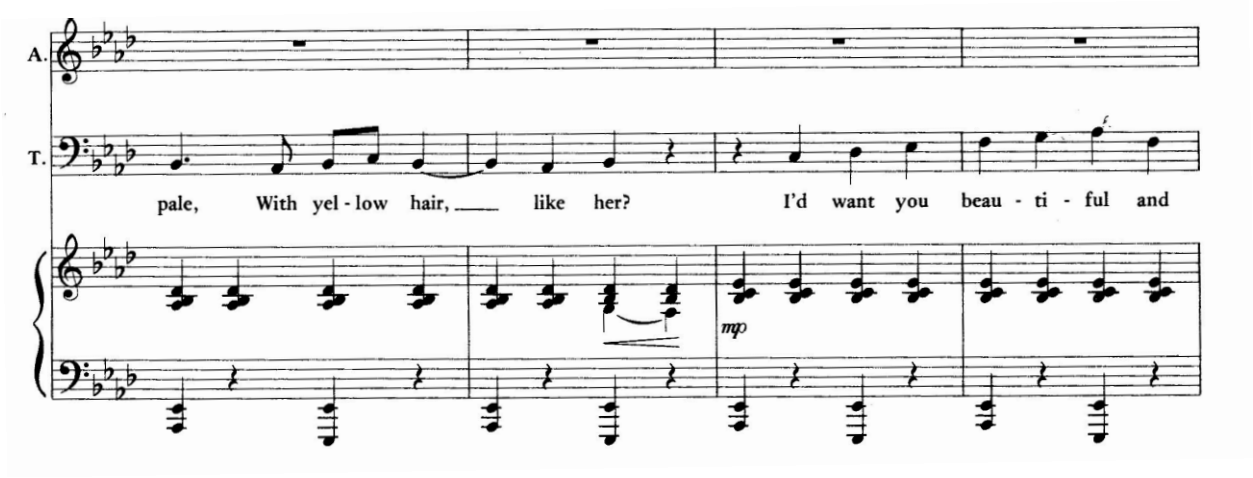

Figure 20: Todd's passivity is musically scored by a prolongation of I in the bass, as it alternates between I and V, and stagnant harmonies. He also sings statically, traveling up and down the A flat major scale.

Later he sings "And you'd be beautiful and pale, and look too much like her," again her, referring to Lucy.[181]

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[179] The sexual undertones of his violent acts are especially apparent in the 2006 Tim Burton film, wherein Todd does not just slit the Judge's throat, but stabs him repeatedly, penetrating him with an extension of himself, as explained at the conclusion of "My Friends." This act parallels Turpin's rape of Lucy, and exacts a real poetic vengeance upon him by Todd.

[180] It is important to note that Sweeney Todd has still never seen Johanna since he has returned. All he has are his memories.

[181] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd,*258.

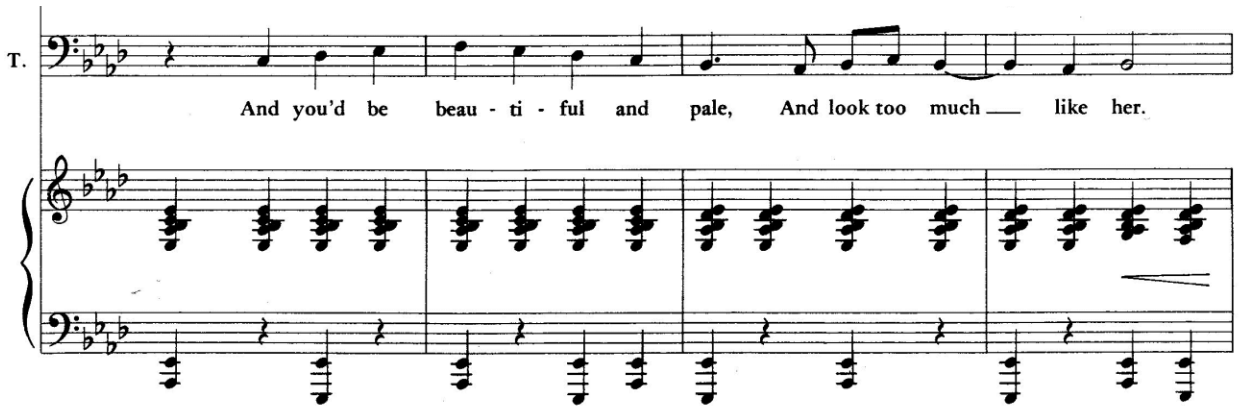

Figure 21: The only way that Todd's "Johanna" builds is by adding chord tones in the upper harmonies. The bass stays stagnant and Todd's melody hardly changes.

Fungibility is one of the tenants of objectification, and here Todd's tendency to replace Lucy with Johanna is a clear example. However, his second statement "like" implies a certain discomfort with this fungibility because of its incestuous insinuations, using it as a justification for why he is not upset over not seeing her again. He also emphasizes her hair, singing, "with yellow hair, like her," and "with yellow hair, like wheat."[182] This is a reduction to body parts, a reduction of Johanna to her hair. Todd's objectification, while negative in some ways, seems to be less vile than the Judge's and even less negative than Antony's, especially when compared with Todd's actions during this song; perhaps this is because Johanna is less an object of sexual desire, and more an object of nostalgia and loss. However, Nussbaum's claim that denial of autonomy is the strongest tenet of objectification may offer a different reason. Todd does not attempt to control or possess Johanna, but she does seem to stand in for his entire life before Turpin sent him to prison. Todd "sees himself unjustly as…having been deprived access to what is rightfully his own."[183] Todd's belief that his life and what he owned, including Lucy and Johanna, had been taken from him by Judge Turpin is an important part of his character.

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[182] Ibid., 246-248.
[183] Mack , *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd,* 64.

As has been illustrated, Johanna's objectification by the three main male characters is the central focus of the plot. As many Marxist, socialist, and radical feminists believed, the women of *Sweeney Todd* become oppressed through their domestication and ownership by men, i.e., their relationship to men.[184] Although there is little gift exchange of women between men during the production, there is stealing of other men's women. This "illegal" exchange is what creates the dysfunctional homosocial bonds between Todd, Turpin, and Antony. Violence comes out of the perception of ownership of Johanna and the homosocial bonds created by that perception; not only are Lucy and Johanna caught up in the violence, but so are Todd's other innocent victims. The objectification of women becomes the fundamental way in which Turpin exploits and uses Todd, and in turn, the foundation for Todd's future murderous behaviors; his desperation for revenge is a consequence of having his objects stolen. The "traffic in women" then, becomes an essential component of how the capitalist system allows for further exploitation of the lower classes.

[184] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 158.

Conclusion

"There was a barber and his wife,
And she was beautiful,
A foolish barber and his wife.
She was his reason and his life,
And she was beautiful.
And she was virtuous,
And he was naïve."[185]

Thus ends the grisly tale of Sweeney Todd, when he realizes the beggar woman, who he carelessly murdered, was actually his wife, Lucy. She had gone insane after Turpin's rape and had turned to begging and prostitution as a way to survive in London's oppressive capitalist system. Lucy is a victim of a world where objects become people (Todd calls his razors "My friends"), and where people become objects to be used for revenge, sex, or capital gain. Todd is unable to identify Lucy because her identity is contained in her virtuousness and beauty. She becomes unrecognizable to him after the destruction of her virtuousness at the hands of her capitalist oppressors. It is Todd's inability to overcome the virgin/whore dichotomy, which places women's worth on their beauty and virginity that causes him to not be able to see the truth behind the beggar woman's identity, even as he literally runs into her in the very first scene of the musical. When viewed through Rubin's sex/gender system and the traffic of women in capitalist societies, the tragic ending turns into an inevitable and predictable consequence of bourgeois values, one where a husband is unable to recognize his own wife, where she becomes to him as disposable as any member of the lower classes.

[185] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 360-361.

Urban economic crisis has continued to spur renewed interest in this tragic tale. I do not believe it is coincidence that after the crisis in American cities caused by 9/11 and as economists and other intellectuals on the Left began to predict the current recession, the story of Sweeney Todd experienced resurgence. This reappearance included a Broadway revival in 2005, one that emphasized the Brechtian undertones by reducing the orchestration and having the performers play the instruments on stage. More significantly, it included a multi-million dollar blockbuster directed by Tim Burton and released in December 2006. These updates, however, were much darker in tone than either the original penny dreadful or even the original 1979 Broadway performance, reflecting a new somber understanding of what modern urban life entails, including the constant threat of terrorism and the impending economic crisis.

The movie itself emphasizes a number of themes already covered in this paper. Burton's staging of Lucy's rape includes a glamorous ball wherein the minuet is prominently danced and Judge Turpin's mask has a long, phallic nose. Although there is no chorus, the fourth wall is cinematically broken as blood squirts onto the camera lens during Todd's version of "Johanna." Burton creates a new set that emphasizes the dirtiness of the city, including rats in the street and the sewers, cockroaches in Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, and smoke billowing into the sky. The urban setting is also reinforced by two key moments: the scene change before the first encounter with Mrs. Lovett that takes the audience through the winding streets of London and the panoramic view of the city at the end of "My Friends." The deformed homosocial bond between Turpin and Todd becomes strikingly clear as Burton chooses to have Todd stab Turpin multiple times with his razor, something that Todd has firmly established is an extension of himself, rather than merely slitting Turpin's throat. This moment is a symbol for rape, as

Todd literally penetrates Turpin, just as Turpin penetrated Lucy, thus perfectly obtaining his revenge.

Johanna herself is even more silenced. Her duet with Antony, "Kiss Me," is completely cut, as are all of her lines from Todd's "Johanna." She literally only sings "Green Finch and Linnet Bird." She is also played by the young Jayne Wisener, only seventeen during the time of production. Her age makes her appear even more helpless and at the mercy of the many older men who wish to control her life. Johanna at the end, however, is given room to voice her feelings about the situation, a moment she is not allotted in the original Broadway score. She asks Antony, "So we run away and all our dreams come true?" Antony replies, "I hope so." Then, Johanna replies sadly, "I've never had dreams, only nightmares." It is only at this moment that the audience is able to fully comprehend the silence and lack of autonomy that Johanna has experienced throughout the work.

The film is unquestionably darker than the Broadway version. Most of the jokes are cut, including the majority of "A Little Priest," the number which provides the most comic relief. The gore is taken to a level only available in cinema, and Burton's world is dreary and dark, the only splashes of color coming from the red blood. Todd wears the blood of Turpin throughout the end of the movie, as he heartlessly throws Mrs. Lovett into her own oven and her death is showed in more graphic detail than most viewers would care to see. The movie ends solemnly and softly, fading away from the murdered body of Todd holding his dead wife, rather than the energetic, dialectic ending afforded by the chorus during the Broadway show. This darkness reflects a changing landscape and a continuing uncertainty about the economic welfare of the inhabitants of the urban jungle and a globalized world.

The consequences of capitalism and globalization on the urban population will continue to support urban legends such as Sweeney Todd, although these legends begin to take new forms as relevant to the times, including new ways of understanding gender relations in connection to a changing global, capitalist landscape. Rae Langton explains,

> One needs no crystal ball to guess that the forces of global capitalism will be around for a while, and with them a tendency to treat people not only as consumers but as commodities, items for use and consumption, and that this is likely to have a continuing effect on women's lives.[186]

As people struggle with the implications of capitalism on their lives, as understanding of the intricacies and interactions of oppression and privilege expands, the Sweeney Todd legend will most likely mutate in form to express these changes. However, capitalism's cannibalistic implications will continue to arouse fascination with the story. As Todd and Mrs. Lovett sing, "The history of the world, my sweet…/Oh, Mister Todd, ooh, Mister Todd, What does it tell?/ Is who gets eaten and who gets to eat!/And Mister Todd, too Mister Todd, who gets to sell!...its man devouring man, my dear, and who are we to deny it in here!"[187]

[186] Langton , *Sexual Solipsism,* 244.
[187] Sondheim, *Sweeney Todd*, 233.

Appendix: Plots Summaries

Summary of *The String of Pearls* by Anonymous

Sweeney Todd is a barber on Fleet Street, where he murders wayward sailors and rural countrymen for their money. He murders a man for a string of pearls, which the reader finds out later are worth £10,000. They were originally intended for the young ingénue, Johanna Oakley, from her betrothed, Mark Ingestrie, whom the audience and Johanna assume was lost at sea. A friend of the murdered man, Colonel Jeffrey, knows that the pearls were intended for Johanna and contacts her to help him find the pearls, which he suspects were stolen by Todd. Todd is assisted by a young Tobias Ragg, who Todd blackmails into keeping his secrets. Tobias discovers the barber's murderous ways so Todd has Tobias locked up in Mr. Fogg's Asylum. Johanna and Colonel Jeffrey create a plan to uncover Todd, and Johanna becomes the hero, discovering the secret of Todd's revolving chair. It is discovered that the awful stench coming from St. Dunstable's church on Fleet Street is due to the remains of Todd's evil deeds after Mrs. Lovett has butchered the bodies for her pies. Todd, attempting to escape, poisons Mrs. Lovett; however, he is eventually killed by a man kept prisoner in Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, who is then revealed to be Mark Ingestrie. Johanna and Mark are reunited along with the string of pearls.

Summary of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*

The story begins when Antony, a young sailor, arrives in London with a passenger whom he rescued in the ocean, a man by the name of Sweeney Todd. It is soon revealed that sixteen years prior, Todd, originally named Benjamin Barker, was falsely accused by an evil judge named Turpin. Turpin sent Todd away to Australia in order to seduce Todd's wife, Lucy. Lucy refused to succumb, however, so Judge Turpin raped her. Lucy subsequently poisoned herself, leaving Todd and Lucy's one-year-old daughter Johanna to be adopted by Judge Turpin.

Todd returns, determined to achieve revenge against Judge Turpin. When he returns to his old home, he finds it occupied by Mrs. Lovett, a widowed baker who makes the worst pies in London. Mrs. Lovett agrees to help Todd achieve revenge. Meanwhile, Antony falls in love with Johanna. Turpin catches Antony eyeing Johanna, and he decides that he must marry Johanna to protect her from other men like Antony. He goes to Todd's shop for a shave, but right as Todd is about to kill him, Antony bursts into the room, describing his plot to kidnap Johanna. The Judge storms out, and Todd misses his opportunity for revenge. Todd, angered, decides that all men should die because they are either evil or miserable wretches. He and Mrs. Lovett hatch a plan to kill Todd's customers and cook them into pies.

The second act begins by showing Mrs. Lovett's successful baking business, aided by Tobias Ragg, a boy that she adopted after Todd killed his

abusive master. Todd and Lovett continue to have a successful business, yet Todd desires revenge. Antony returns, telling Todd that Turpin has locked Johanna up in a madhouse. Todd and Antony scheme to get Johanna out of the madhouse. In the meantime, Toby begins to have suspicions about Todd and tries to warn Mrs. Lovett. Mrs. Lovett locks him in the basement until she and Todd can dispatch of him. The Beadle, the Judge's henchman, appears to inquire after the smell coming from Mrs. Lovett's bake house. Before he can go down to the basement, however, Todd convinces him to get a shave and kills him. Toby, seeing the body, tries to hide. Mrs. Lovett and Todd look for him, but to no avail. While they are out, Antony returns with Johanna, who hides in a trunk while Antony goes to fetch the carriage. Todd returns to his shop to await Turpin, yet finds a beggar woman who has reappeared throughout the play in the room. He hears Turpin coming up the stairs, so he quickly kills and disposes of the beggar woman. Todd then convinces Judge Turpin to shave before Johanna arrives, reveals his identity, and murders him. Johanna, having witnessed the murder, begins to panic as Todd sees her. Todd lets her go, not realizing it is his daughter, because he hears Mrs. Lovett screaming in the bake house. Antony and Johanna then run away together.

Todd goes down to the bake house, only to realize that the Judge had not been dead when dropped into the basement, so he had grabbed onto Mrs. Lovett. As he goes to move the bodies to the oven, Todd recognizes the body of the beggar woman. It is none other than his wife, Lucy. When she had poisoned

herself, she did not die, but instead, she went insane. Mrs. Lovett knew the entire time and hid it from Todd because of her love for him. Out of anger and despair, Todd throws Mrs. Lovett into her own oven. As he cries over Lucy's body, Toby reappears and kills Todd out of revenge for killing his adopted mother, Mrs. Lovett.

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